

TEACHING TENETS OF FAITH THROUGH A SPECIAL WORSHIP LECTIONARY:
OVERCOMING SYNCRETISM IN AN ANABAPTIST SETTING

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With great thanks to my beautifully supportive wife and friend, Emily.

May our grown sons, Lars and Nels, keep aspiring to learn all through life.

Thanks go to our Beldor Church friends who expanded their family to include us.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project considers the benefits of the use of a special lectionary with worship planning aids to improve worshipers' understanding of the Christian faith informed by the Anabaptist Tradition. A large sociological study by Smith and Denton indicates that American Christians' grasp of orthodoxy has degraded to the point that a majority of youth and their parents believe the essence of the Christian faith is to just be nice.¹ Strands of the American situation have crept into worshipers' thinking at many congregations. For that reason, a project to improve understanding of the historic, orthodox faith was conducted at Beldor Mennonite Church. Recognizing that families seem increasingly unwilling to attend additional gatherings for Christian education outside of worship, this thesis-project will consider if including elements of theological teaching within the context of worship can benefit a congregation. Important areas for future research are suggested. Finally, this thesis-project provides a catechetical lectionary tool with worship aids that others may use for worship planning to convey and reinforce elements of Christian faith.

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162.

CHAPTER 1

THE STUDY PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Beldor Mennonite Church is a small congregation at the eastern edge of the Shenandoah River Valley in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Elkton, Virginia. One occasionally hears people refer to their setting as Beldor “Holler” (or hollow), common parlance in Appalachia for being between mountains. A majority of men work in, or are retired from, construction trades. Women work in, or retired from, medical support, office administration, teaching, and homemaking. Though working people of the Beldor area commute daily to jobs in diverse work settings east and west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, area residents are of an Appalachian Mountain culture where generations have lived semi-isolated from both the Shenandoah Valley to the west and the Piedmont region to the east. There are strong community values of hospitality and mutual aid among residents of the area coupled with strong self-reliance. Some residents are open to outside cultures while many are slow to warm to people and ideas from outside the Beldor/Elkton area.¹ All would like to conserve the positive aspects of their culture and way of life.

Historical Impacts to the Beldor Area

The Beldor area has lost many hundreds of families over the last 100 years. Two seminal events caused mass departures. A third factor continues to this day. First, an invasion of chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*, formerly *Endothia parasitica*) killed all adult American chestnut trees (*Castanea dentata*) in the Blue Ridge Mountains and

¹ The author’s experience is confirmed by interviews with past home missionaries and pastors of Beldor Mennonite Church.

Cumberland Plateau. This tree species had composed 20%-31% of upland eastern forests.² Loss of the tree species meant loss of edible chestnuts from the area, which had devastating impacts on game—turkey, squirrel, white-tailed deer, and bear, among others—on whom people depended for subsistence.³ People were no longer able to harvest nuts for sale, and they could not fatten hogs for market as in former times.⁴ Davis reports:

“Mountain residents were right to mourn the loss of the American chestnut...possibly the single most important resource of the Appalachians, providing inhabitants with food, shelter, and in the early twentieth century, a much needed cash income...By the late 1930s, the mountaineer was more off the farmstead than on it, as the food and folkways [changed]...With the death of the chestnut, an entire world would die, eliminating subsistence practices that had been viable in the Appalachian Mountains for more than four centuries.”⁵

People began to leave the area in droves as a result of the biological invasion.

The second event causing out-migration was formation of Shenandoah National Park, 1926-1935, displacing many hundreds of people from the flanks of the Blue Ridge Mountains.⁶ Current residents are second and third generations since the displacement. Stories of families being forced off the land through state-condemnation, and the burning of their homes as they left, are part of many families’ oral history. As a result, there is cultural resentment toward government, large organizations, and strangers to the Beldor community.

² Donald E. Davis, “Historical Significance of American Chestnut to Appalachian Culture and Ecology,” in *Proceedings of Restoration of American Chestnut to Forest Lands*, Steiner and Carlson, eds., USDI, NPS, Natural Resources Report NPS/NCR/CUE/NRR-2006-001 (College Station, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2005), 53, accessed December 12, 2017, <http://ecosystems.psu.edu/research/chestnut/information/conference-2004/conference/conference-proceedings>.

³ Davis, 55.

⁴ Davis, 56.

⁵ Davis, 57-58.

⁶ Shenandoah National Park was authorized May 22, 1926, by federal Public Law ch. 363 §1, 44 Stat. 616, which began a 10-year process by the Commonwealth of Virginia to remove residents by voluntary purchase of lands or forced condemnation. Official establishment of the park took place December 26, 1935.

The third, and ongoing, factor is the mega-trend of people leaving to find employment in urban areas.⁷ A few families left to farm more arable flatlands elsewhere, but mostly they left in search of work. As a result of these factors, where over a thousand people once lived on the hillsides, now about 250 people live in 95 homes⁸ within 300 feet of the Beldor and Sandy Bottom roads.⁹

Like so many areas of displacement around the nation, Beldor residents suffer feelings of loss and diminishment. “It’s all changed now,” said one church member.¹⁰ He was referring to the forests that now cover the hillsides on either side of the valley, once open land for grazing and family farms. Metaphorically, he could also have been referring to the loss of a cohesive community.

Conflicted, many residents would like to bring people back to the area to restore a vibrant community, yet they do not want the influence of “outside” cultures. Residents might reason that the best course would be to attract relatives of current residents, who they presume would have similar values, to repopulate the area. That sentiment is translated into the wish for restoration of the Beldor Mennonite Church to its “glory days” of religious fervor in the 1950s and attendance that peaked in the 1970s-1990s.

Beldor Mennonite Church

The history of Beldor Mennonite Church began with missional outreach to the Elkton area led by Eastern Mennonite College students during the 1930s. Åkerson’s

⁷ It is a trend that began with the industrial revolution.

⁸ The author counted 95 post boxes along the Beldor/Sandy Bottom roads. Using a multiplier of 2.5 people per post box (home) amounts to about 250 people.

⁹ Sandy Bottom is a side valley connected with the Beldor area.

¹⁰ Anonymous, interview by James Åkerson, Elkton, VA, December 5, 2011.

Celebrating 80 Years of Ministry: The Missional Story of Beldor Church tells part of the story:

YPCA students [Young People's Christian Association] held worship meetings on the streets of Elkton, Grottoes and other towns on Saturday nights...At one Elkton street meeting in 1935, [a resident]...asked the group to come to the Beldor church building and have services.¹¹...Why would someone invite the YPCA to use an EUB [Evangelical United Brethren] building? Richard Keeler...sheds light on the subject. He said the Beldor community felt ownership of the building because many community members helped build it and it seemed abandoned at the time. The EUB had given up sending preachers.¹² It appears that YPCA conducted services in the building for the remainder of the school year before turning leadership over to Middle District of Virginia Mennonite Conference.¹³

Beldor Mennonite Church remains at its original location, having purchased the building and land in 1947¹⁴ and expanded the building to its present form in 1969-71.¹⁵ In 2015 the congregation celebrated 80 years of ministry.

Denominationally, the congregation remains within the Virginia Mennonite Conference of the Mennonite Church USA. Practically, it seems less Anabaptist than a form of an independent non-denominational gathering. As evidence, church elders are not interested in attending conference or district-level denominational meetings and activities. Also, the typical "peace stance" among Mennonites is not a shared belief by many worshipers. In these and other ways, people in the congregation reflect their mountain culture of independence and self-reliance.

¹¹ Harry Anthony Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia: 1900-1960. Volume II* (Verona, VA: McClure Printing Company, Inc., 1972), 156. Robert Wenger, interview by James Åkerson, Rockingham County, February 10, 2012.

¹² Richard Keeler, "History of the Beldor Mennonite Church" (term paper, Eastern Mennonite College, 1959), 2.

¹³ James Åkerson, *Celebrating 80 Years of Ministry: The Missional Story of Beldor Church* (Elkton, VA: Beldor Mennonite Church, 2015), 3-4.

¹⁴ Evelyn Lahman, "Pleasant Thoughts of Beldor" (photo album, Elkton, VA: Beldor Mennonite Church Library), 4.

¹⁵ Archives of the VMC: Beldor Mennonite Church – Archival Box 3, Folder #2 – Communicator, 1970-75, "Beldor Mennonite Church Communicator, October 1971." Hartzler Library, EMU, Harrisonburg, VA.

A brief statistical overview of the area and the congregation is instructive.¹⁶ The 95 households that make up the Beldor community are 100% Caucasian. Occupations include construction trades, business owners, associated medical staffers, professionals, and clerical workers. Predominant family names (by order of the number of family units) include Shifflett, Wood, Lawson, Morris, Breeden, Baugher, Williams, and Pence. Beldor Mennonite Church is also 100% Caucasian.¹⁷ There are 23 households represented in the congregation. Occupations (current and former employment before retirement) include the construction trades and business owners (24%), professional and non-construction business owners (24%), homemakers (21%), associated medical staffers (9%), farm/business owners (6%), and all others (18%). Retired people make up 44% of the worshipping congregation. Predominant family names of community members attending Beldor Mennonite Church (by order of the number of family units) include Shifflett, Wood, Meadows, Dean, Baugher, Williams, Crawford, and Pence.

The Beldor/Sandy Bottom community is a tight-knit gathering of familial relations. That is also reflected within the congregation. Related families (names mentioned above) comprise 78% of all worshipers, the most distant relationship of one family to another is third cousin, with most families being much more closely related. Within the congregation, 68% are female and 32% are male. Among adult worshipers, 83% have been baptized into the Christian faith. Of those remaining, three are children (9-14 years) and three are adults. The congregation is predominantly older, 59.6 years, as compared with U.S. Population data, 37.8 years.¹⁸

¹⁶ These are anecdotal estimates.

¹⁷ These estimates and conclusions are subsequent to seven years of pastoral visitation by the author.

¹⁸ "State Population By Age and Gender—Census 2000, 2010 & Updates," *Proximity*, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://proximityone.com/stateage.htm>. (This is based on U.S. Census data.) Beldor Church data is anecdotal using 10-year age classes.

The majority of worshipers live near the church, 22 in the Beldor/Sandy Bottom area and 9 within five miles. Only six worshipers live further than 5 miles away. Of those who worship regularly, 64% have earned a high school diploma or higher, 36% have not achieved a high school diploma; 39% attend Sunday morning education classes and 61% do not. Of two primary worshipping extended families, one grouping attends Sunday school and the other does not.

The Beldor congregation experienced a significant loss in 2012-13 when seven young adults left. They were hoping to find churches with more programs suited to them, exert independence from their parents, and for some, experience larger fellowships with better hope for finding life partners. The mega-trend of out-migration from the area continues to impact the Beldor congregation as well. Church membership is currently 29 people and attendance hovers around 24. The trends of membership and attendance are decreasing through time.

Table 1.1. Average Membership Per Decade of Beldor Mennonite Church

	--- Decades ---					
	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Average Membership	23	35	45	44	44	33

Because of relationships, culture, and proximity, Beldor Mennonite Church has a clear sense of being a “family church.” The occupational cameo is largely blue-collar trades and farming. In a sense, the church serves a parish, where residents feel membership or ownership to the church even if they do not attend regularly, if at all.¹⁹ Unfortunately, there is a gender gap where women make up two-thirds of the

¹⁹ The obituary of one fellow described him as a “life long member” of Beldor Church; he had not attended worship in scores of years.

congregation, and the age distribution lacks middle and younger age classes with 3.4 times more people of ages 61 and older than the national average.

On the positive side, the proximity of worshipers' homes to the church building, along with the nature of the community, create an easily defined mission area. Outreach efforts are easily focused.

Project Description

In the author's experience with this congregation, worshipers are keenly interested in their faith. As indicated above, most have been baptized and active in their faith for many decades. Some tenets of theology are rock solid in the minds of worshipers—others are less certain. For instance, that a believer must make profession of faith in the lordship of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and salvation is well understood. On the other hand, the role of discipleship in a Christian's life is less broadly known. Whereas most would understand that good works are part of a believer's life, they might wonder if their salvation depends on those works (as per Matthew 25:14*ff* and 25:31*ff*). In the mind of many believers, calling upon Jesus Christ is the one non-negotiable of their faith whereas other theological points are thought to be more for the "professionals" to work out.

There are, unfortunately, elements of more questionable theology that creep into people's thinking. Perhaps most typical is a Christian faith laced with nationalist jingoism. Many have a keen desire for a god that actively protects them and helps them

thrive.²⁰ A small number have elements of superstition mixed into their faith.²¹ These errant faith examples are held alongside Christian orthodoxy. The admixture of faith is religious syncretism.

This syncretism has been nurtured through exposure to travelling evangelists, television evangelists, and family folklore. Some pastors may have contributed to the problem as well, although each resident pastor was examined for orthodoxy prior to credentialing and ordination. Perhaps a stronger influence is the setting. The isolated Appalachian culture specific to the Blue Ridge Mountain range allows old folkways to hold sway even in a post-modern world. However, this regional isolation has also supported positive opportunities for effectively teaching family values and faith.

Considering Christian Education Approaches

This thesis-project is based on the belief that remedial work is needed to help worshipers at Beldor Mennonite Church better understand and embrace their Christian faith. There seem to be a number of helpful ways to address the need. Historically, pastors and volunteers taught the tenets of faith and practice in catechism classes for young people and adults prior to either baptism or “confirmation.” Unfortunately, such programs are typically the last, or only, methodical teaching many believers receive. Though preachers and teachers might continue to mention various tenets of faith in the years that follow, unorthodox understanding can creep into a believer’s consciousness.

²⁰ Most Christians want God to make tangible differences in their lives, not just emotional/spiritual ones, but as the Israelites found through much of their Old Testament history, there is a line crossed when we make God into a genie rather than the sovereign God of the Trinity.

²¹ Anonymous, interview by James Åkerson, Elkton, VA, December 7, 2015. (In the course of the interview the parishioner told a story from his uncle who had seen an apparition of a crying baby atop a fencepost that he took to be an “emblem” of something yet to come.)

Several valid methods of continuing education might be helpful. Weakening faith and growing syncretism has been recognized and documented in religious academic circles (see chapter 3) with demonstrated attempts to rectify the problem. Some utilize Sunday school curricula to methodically reinforce the faith. At Beldor Mennonite Church that approach would not reach the 61% of our worshipers who do not attend Sunday school. Bible studies are a valid means to attempt the same. Small group fellowships, “seeker” and new member meetings, and mid-week Bible studies are but a few attempts. Some methods raise the bar, encouraging greater personal commitment, including accountability groups, Huddles,²² and Life Transformation Groups.²³

While such methods are valid and important, each requires additional, scheduled time commitments from those who participate adding “one more thing” to parishioners’ busy lives at a time when there is diminishing willingness to attend activities beyond worship. Researchers and curriculum publishers confirm these observations. A Doctor of Ministry student found many indicators of decreased Sunday school attendance among Southern Baptists during the period 1950 to 2006.²⁴ Sunday school enrollment decreased more than membership and worship attendance. He concluded, “Sunday school has seen its best days and is no longer a viable program for the twenty-first century.”²⁵ Similarly, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, a Lutheran-oriented organization, found that Sunday school attendance in 2010 had dropped 39.7% from 1990 levels, and that vacation Bible

²² Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People like Jesus Did*, 2nd ed. (Pawleys Island, SC: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2011), 203.

²³ Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples through Life Transformation Groups* (CMA Resources, 1999).

²⁴ Billy Nale, “The Sunday School As A Viable Tool for Church Growth in the 21st Century” (DMin diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 38-47, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?id=G4UAcnmSXPgC&pg=PA46&lpg=PA46&dq=decreasing+sunday+school+attendance&source=bl&ots=0jeWCxJTp0&sig=vDt3VvIIC-2DmC2JoezRIoQnSqM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwith8mAhsjKAhXLez4KHTi1DEAQ6AEIQjAJ#v=onepage&q=decreasing%20sunday%20school%20attendance&f=false>.

²⁵ Nale, 47.

school attendance dropped 59.6% during that same period.²⁶ Based on these findings, it would seem that counting on extra-worship gatherings to effectively address educational challenges of the church is no longer a wise use of time, energy, and funding. What remains available, then, is the precious gathering time of worship.

Addressing Theological Syncretism in Worship

Given these trends, clearly reflected at Beldor Mennonite Church, the question then becomes, can additional Christian education in the context of worship positively influence adult believers in identifying and affirming Christian orthodoxy in the Anabaptist Tradition? This thesis-project will explore the use of an intentional lectionary and related worship planning aids to present and re-enforce the basic tenets of faith. It is designed to address the breadth of faith within a portion of one year, utilizing the seasons of “Ordinary time” as identified in the Revised Common Lectionary to help worshipers progress through the equivalent of a catechism as they engage in worship. The system is designed to be flexible enough to accommodate church holidays, independent biblical teaching, and the other realities such as the pastor’s times away from the pulpit.

The desired outcomes will include: (1) improved understanding of an orthodox Christian faith informed by Anabaptist confessions and Reformed sources, and (2) a heightened awareness of the difference between Christian orthodoxy and extra-Christian beliefs. Since a universally accepted definition of orthodoxy within the broader Church has remained elusive for two millennia, heightened awareness of the signs and challenges of syncretistic faith may be the most attainable outcome. Because the implementation

²⁶ Todd Buegler, “Why Is No One Talking About This,” *The Network: The ELCA Youth Ministry Network*, December 2, 2013, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://elcaymnet.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/why-is-no-one-talking-about-this/>.

phase of this thesis-project is limited, results and conclusions will be measured following implementation of portions of the overall project.

Thesis Outline

This thesis-project includes five chapters, an appendix of pertinent materials, and a bibliography. Chapter One has offered a description of the research setting along with a statement of the problem and a project description. Chapter Two will define the theological framework for investigation, including God's call for leaders to provide robust theological information, correctives, admonishment, and exhortation to grow believers' understanding of orthodox Anabaptist-Christian faith. It will speak to the need for believers and church leaders to recognize syncretistic thinking. Chapter Three will include a review of selected literature relevant to the project, both for framing the scope of the project and to build upon others' experience. Chapter Four will describe the details of the project, including the proffered lectionary cycle of theological elements and worship aids, a description of the lectionary portions for evaluating the project results, and a detailed description of the survey method employed. Chapter Five will describe the outcomes and findings of the project including interpretation of survey responses as well as the author's conclusions about the nature, benefits, and cautions regarding the project, and suggestions to improve the lectionary cycle and teaching materials. The final chapter will also include recommendations for future research on this subject.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The Bible is clear that God does not delight in humankind being left in the dark about God's self. We are invited to know God through Jesus Christ, the Commandments, and God's Spirit.¹ We are called to have fellowship with God for God's benefit and that we might be set free from the tyranny of sin.² We are not free to appropriate parts of that knowing of the LORD God to combine, by our own design, aspects of other gods and idols we may fancy; we are called to recognize and worship the LORD God Almighty only.³ Church leaders are commissioned to utilize scripture, instruction, correction, and exhortation to teach believers and seekers in the way of Christ and to correct wrong thinking that becomes apparent.⁴ These words are loaded with meaning. Let us unwrap them to understand the theological framework for the purpose of this thesis-project.

Called to Know God

We are invited to know God. That is apparent in the history of God's walk with humanity, in God's presentation of religious law throughout scripture, and in denominational faith statements. Genesis 1:27-28 depicts our early relationship with God. In that first chapter of the Bible we learn that God spoke to humanity, blessed them, and gave them a task. This is the first mention of our relationship with God. It is a direct, one-on-one relationship, where humankind is given purpose and meaning.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be

¹ Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 4:35, Psalm 34:8, and John 14:7.

² Colossians 1:16, Revelation 4:11.

³ Deuteronomy 4:2, 5:7-8.

⁴ Matthew 28:18-20, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Corinthians 12:28ff.

fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:27-28 NRSV)⁵

Additional insight about our relationship with God is given in the second Creation account. Here we see our commissioned work, delegated authority, and even a hint at a playful relationship!

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it... Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” (Genesis 2:15, 19)

While God did all the work of Creation, creating the fish, birds, and animals, God brought them to humanity to name, and “whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name[!]” From the beginning there was a close, appreciative relationship, where God trusted humanity to do our best, where God did not overrule our decisions, and where humanity worked in partnership in blessing what God had done—for surely, to name something is to acknowledge it, bless it, and give it importance. Indeed, philosophers believe that to name something is to give it existence; once named, a creature cannot be denied its place in reality.⁶ Thus, God playfully gave humanity a key role in the act of Creation itself. We continue that work as we learn more about the world, naming newfound creatures, cosmic entities, and processes. As an aside, we are faithful to God’s commission as we tend and preserve them as well.

⁵ All quoted scripture is New International Version (NIV) unless, as with this, otherwise cited.

⁶ Ronald Jager, *The Development of Bertrand Russell’s Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 257, accessed December 16, 2017, <https://books.google.com/books?id=QYqD-27T50C&pg=PA257&lpg=PA257&dq=to+name+something&source=bl&ots=HZeoh5yCOz&sig=RXUdyMLS DiYde04pU18P5uc0JZg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi9z9Go5o7YAhXGKyYKH3KBFo4ChDoAQg9MAQ#v=onepage&q=to%20name%20something&f=false>.

There was a time of wonderful fellowship between humankind and God as evidenced by God's tender desire to create a "helper as...partner" for Adam (Genesis 2:20ff) and in the daily walks "in the cool of a day" that God devoted to be with man (Genesis 3:8-9 NIV). After our fall into disobedience and sin, however, humanity became blinded to the existence, power, and delight of God. God knows that we do not now naturally look to God. Our hearts need help to know God. The prophet says of God, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jeremiah 24:7). Dozens of times in scripture God finds ways to convince us that the LORD is God.

Relationship and witness of God's mighty acts are early means to convince us. In Exodus 6:7 God says, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians." God's reasoning appears to be that in the relationship itself and in the witness of the LORD'S mighty acts the people would come to know God. Merely witnessing God's mighty acts was also intended as means to such knowledge. God reasoned that Pharaoh and the Egyptians would know God by their witness of the plagues against them (Exodus 7:5). To hear God's prophets foretell an event and then to witness fulfillment leads to knowing. As with the Egyptians, so it was with unfaithful people of Israel. The prophet said, "Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am the LORD" (Ezekiel 6:7). Similar statements to the effect that relationship and/or witness cause knowing, whether of blessings or punishments, are replete in scripture. Jesus speaks in the same vein: "...When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will

know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (John 8:28).

Religious rites and encouragement to tell family stories of God’s mighty acts were instituted by God so that future generations would know the LORD. An example is the instruction regarding the Festival of Tabernacles: “Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 23:42-44). God tells us that faithfully remembering what we have seen and experienced is a means to the end of knowing God. Moses spoke to Joshua, “You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed” (Joshua 23:14b).

God encourages quiet times reasoning that if we take moments of our lives to be quiet, our souls will remember and know God better. In Psalm 46:10a the psalmist says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

God’s Word and Holy Spirit witness to us that God is LORD of all. God’s teaching has always been passed along by the faithful. In Deuteronomy we learn:

“Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people. When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.’” (32:44-47)

We learn too that God’s written word is intended to teach us of God: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

It is the Holy Spirit that bears witness to the truth we hear. The Holy Spirit also helps us understand what we read. The apostle said, “This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6). We are wise to study God’s Word and respond to God’s Holy Spirit that we may know the LORD.

Fellowship and Freedom

Once we come to know that the LORD is God, we are invited to know that he is good and desires our fellowship. It is not an ogre or author of ill and ugliness that we are drawn to know. The psalmist says: “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (34:8). Psalms are replete with claims of God’s goodness and the beauty of God’s creation. Along that line of thinking, the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man[sic]?” Answer, “Man’s [sic] chief end is to glorify God⁷ and to enjoy him forever.”⁸ Those words speak of a warm, joyful relationship stemming from identifying and praising the ways and the works of God.

Jesus Christ called us into a warm, family-bonded relationship with God when he taught us the Lord’s Prayer. Right from its outset we are invited to speak of God as “Our Father which art in heaven.” The concept of a father is a far cry from a supreme being or Almighty God. Jesus invites us to understand our place as beloved children of God. We are not relegated to an outer circle of acquaintances due to our sin. We may approach

⁷ Psalm 86, Isaiah 60:21, Romans 11:36, 1 Corinthians 10:31, and Revelation 4:11.

⁸ Psalm 16:5-11, 144:15, Isaiah 12:2, Luke 2:10, Philippians 4:4, Revelation 21:3-4, and “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” in *Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part 1* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2014), 205.

God as beloved family. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, “Why did Christ command us to call God ‘our Father’?” Answer, “To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer what should be basic to our prayer—a childlike reverence and trust that through Christ God has become our Father, and that just as our parents do not refuse us the things of this life, even less will God our Father refuse to give us what we ask in faith.”⁹

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q17, says that we can only know God as God chooses to be made known. That might cause us to despair, wondering if God wants us (individually and specifically) to know him, but we need not worry, “For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). That passage should convince us not to fear that God calls some to condemnation and others to salvation even before we are born.¹⁰ Calvin’s logic stemmed from his keen appreciation of God’s sovereignty. Indeed, God is sovereign in all matters. Anabaptist theologians understand, however, that Genesis 2-3 demonstrates the allowed struggle between humanity’s God-given freewill and God’s keen desire for relationship with humanity. The same account also demonstrates the cost of ill-chosen freedom. God would be known by all means. Through God’s wooing of humanity by general and specific revelation, we are alerted to God’s presence and called to respond. We are not slaves to that call but are invited into fellowship—that we may choose to love the LORD God of the universe.

⁹ “The Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Psalter Hymnal: Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 120 Q.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume II*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 3.21.5.

Called to Love God Only

God's invitation to fellowship is exclusive as seen in the first Commands (Exodus 20:1-6; Deuteronomy 5:6-10). We design a god of our preference or accept parts of the LORD and incorporate aspects of other gods and idols to our peril. We are called to love the LORD our God only and to practice our faith as God prescribes.

Excellent teaching points on God's exclusive call upon our lives are found in question 94 and 95 of the Heidelberg Catechism.¹¹

Q 94. What does the Lord Require in the first Commandment?

A. That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. That I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust him alone, look to him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love him, fear him, and honor him with all my heart. In short, that I give up anything rather than go against his will in any way.

Q 95. What is idolatry?

A. Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word."

By these words we can understand that syncretism of faith is a result of our sin. It is contrary to God's exclusive call upon our lives. It endangers our eternal standing with God. As the apostle Paul said, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5).

Called to Teach God's Commands

This section explores the theological underpinnings for sharing faith. There is a strong and ongoing mandate from God for humanity to learn and keep his commands.

¹¹ "The Heidelberg Catechism," 94, 95 Q.

God commanded Joshua to lead the people by using the Law, which Moses passed down, saying, “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8). In order to keep God’s Law in Joshua’s thinking was to demand that he learn it. The trivial pursuits of this world were therefore to be subdued by the premier values and teachings of God.

There is a strong and ongoing mandate from God to pass along and teach God’s commands to the generations that follow. Prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham entertained three visitors. At one point the visitors spoke as for God, saying, “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Genesis 18:19). In the midst of being freed from Egyptian slavery Moses said to the people:

“Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’ Then the people bowed down and worshiped.” (Exodus 12:24-27)

The question arises, however, what is the best way to fulfill the mandate to teach the succeeding generations?

Though Sunday schools had their origins in the 1780s among unchurched urban children in England¹² and cheders had their origins in Europe for Jewish children to be taught Hebrew and Torah about the same time,¹³ there was teaching of young Jewish

¹² Timothy Larsen, “When Did Sunday Schools Start?” *Christianity Today: Christian History*, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/when-did-sunday-schools-start.html>.

¹³ “Cheder,” *Wikipedia*, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheder>.

children much earlier. Jesus must have been taught scripture as a youth in the home or synagogue.¹⁴ Scripture leads us to believe that Jesus was a bright and avid student. He had learned much scripture by the time he was twelve years old. “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers” (v. 47 of Luke 2:41-52). By the time he was preaching and teaching in his ministry, he was commonly called rabbi/teacher; those words are found 123 times in the gospels.

Teaching God’s word is the sacred call for all believers so that others may know. We are each to meditate upon God’s word and discuss God’s way with people throughout each day. Parents are to instruct their children. We are to share our faith as God said through Moses:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

As we do these things, the prophet says we do something lovely. “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7). Paul echoes those words: “And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news’” (Romans 10:15).

¹⁴ Contrary to common prejudice against residents of Galilee, one source believes the area was highly religious during Jesus’ time with an active program of religious training. “Rabbi and Talmidim,” *That the World May Know: Focus On the Family*, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.thatttheworldmayknow.com/rabbi-and-talmidim>.

God commanded his leaders and all believers to teach the people so that they would know God. When Moses spent too much time in administrative activity, Jethro said:

“What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people’s representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people [to be judges and handle the people’s administrative needs].” (Exodus 18:17-21)

Teaching was sacred duty. “Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them” (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Though all believers are to share their faith and teach their children, some are called specially to that ministry. In the Old Testament, priests and religious leaders were tasked with teaching. “For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the law” (2 Chronicles 15:3). In Nehemiah 8, we see the great teacher, Ezra, in the act of teaching God’s Law in Jerusalem to the whole assembled post-exile gathering of Israelites.

The New Testament affirms the special call of teachers. Jesus’ last word to his apostles before his ascension was the command to teach.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

There can also be commissioning for teaching specific groups of people. Paul said, “And for this purpose I was appointed a herald ... and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.” (1 Timothy 2:7)

A great majority of scriptural references are about “teachers of the law.” We see that scope broadened to teach Christ’s ways (as Matthew 28 above) and in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11, among others. However, since Christ did not come to abolish the law (Matthew 5:17), another way of thinking is that Christ’s way and commands are now part of the Law. Anabaptists understand that Jesus’ commands and life example is the lens through which we are to interpret all scripture.¹⁵

We are instructed by Jesus’ words to teachers of the Law that we must be pliable to follow the Holy Spirit; we may not cling to old understandings merely because they follow our tradition. Indeed, our teaching must be summarized in sound doctrine. “You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). James reminds us of the responsibility inherent in teaching. “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

Biblical Teaching Methods

This thesis-project is considering a method of introducing, correcting, and reinforcing elements of Christian faith within the context of worship. The goal is a clearer and more orthodox understanding of Christ’s Way. Teaching in worship has a strong

¹⁵ Article 4 says, “...Led by the Holy Spirit in the church, we interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ,” in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective: A Summary Statement* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), Article #4.

theological and biblical basis. What follows are examples of teaching in both Old and New Testaments.

Old Testament Examples

Prime in our understanding of what pleases God comes from the accounts of Creation and Fall (Genesis 1-3). Here we learn that God created and called the creation “good.” Creation pleased God very much. We learn it is wiser to honor what God has made and what God commands than to go our own way. We stray from God’s commands to our peril. Such stories are found in every book of the Old Testament,¹⁶ each for the purpose of conveying truths about God and humankind.

The codified law for God’s Chosen People is found in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The people were encouraged to learn and obey the law so as to please God and live long. It was God’s call to Moses’ and the leaders that followed him, to teach God’s laws. Deuteronomy 5:31 says, “But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess.” We are to understand that God’s leaders are called to make sure the people know, remember, and obey God’s Law. God’s leaders do not merely lead, they teach.

Admonishment and exhortation are prime roles of the prophets. It is important to remember, however, that those devices were also used in the story form and codified portions of the Law. As an example, Cain was confronted, admonished, and punished for his murder of Abel (Genesis 4) and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, died when offering

¹⁶ Teaching via story form is found even in the law, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Law and wisdom books such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are peppered with stories and visual snippets to capture the imagination and heart.

unholy fire amid priestly duties, thus becoming ex-humus admonishment to Aaron's remaining sons to perform their priestly duties faithfully (Numbers 3). As Moses prepared the people to enter the Promised Land, he exhorted them to put their best foot forward to please God so they would live long and prosperously in that land. Deuteronomy 26:16 says, "This very day the LORD your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul."

As for the prophets, their tone was most often one of corrective admonishment for failing to live up to God's covenant. The prophets stood as teachers who spoke of impending punishment if the people would not turn from their errant ways. Jeremiah and Hosea are perhaps harshest, but each of the prophets in turn admonished the people powerfully.

There are gentler moments among the prophets where God exhorts rather than admonishes the people to repent and follow him to find peace with God. Jonah stands as an example of story form exhortation. Rather than pointing God's judgmental finger at Judah and Israel, God focused on the notoriously sinful Nineveh, part of Assyria. Upon Jonah's prophetic work, Nineveh's king repented and all Nineveh with him. The lesson for all listeners and readers of Jonah's story is that God may relent at our repentance. Through the teaching of Jonah, it should be no surprise that God extends his message of mercy and grace to all peoples.

God's people are not free to fashion a syncretistic faith. That is a taint that God does not accept. God's people are called to hold on to one true faith as described in scripture. God's condemnation of idolatry through the oscillating stories of the Book of

Judges, the histories Judah's and Israel's unfaithful kingdoms, and the words of the prophets show us that our faith is to be in the LORD God alone. We are taught:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one... You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” (Deuteronomy 6:4 and 5:7-8)

New Testament Examples

Jesus is considered by many to have been a master of teaching theological truth. He employed outright commands (Matthew 7:1). He used stories to illuminate truth (Matthew 4:19). He created morals from episodes in their lives (Luke 21:1ff). He used parables (Matthew 20:1ff). The gospels contain very little of his outright preaching, making it all the more powerful because of its rarity, including the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5ff) and “sermon on the plain” (Luke 6).

The gospels illustrate that Jesus' favored teaching approach was through story, simile, and parable to invoke his listeners' imagination and continued meditative thinking. Epic in their power to fascinate and teach us truths down through the ages are Jesus' stories of the farmer who sowed seeds and the results (Mark 4), the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), the Judge who gave righteous judgment because of the woman's persistence (Luke 18:1ff), and the separation of sheep from goats due to their prior actions (Matthew 25:31ff).

We see in the Book of Acts and in the epistles, that Stephen, Peter, and Paul were preachers and teachers who used very little story form, parable, or illustration. Their preaching styles seem to make no time for more sophisticated teaching approaches (Acts 1:15ff, 2:14ff, 3:12ff, 4:8ff, 7, 13:9ff, 17:22ff, 21:40ff, 24:10ff, and 26:1ff). Philip's

teaching, on the other hand, is more nuanced. Acts 8:5 says he proclaimed. Acts 8:26ff says that he listened to the Ethiopian eunuch reading scripture; he asked a simple question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” (v. 30), which opened the door to Philip providing scriptural context and explaining its meaning.

Jesus and the epistle writers acted as interpreters of the Law and therefore taught their listeners about God’s Law. They provided correctives to teach us of the initial intent of particular commands and also of additional lessons one can gain from them. Jesus said:

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

By Jesus’ interpretation we understand many lessons: that God and God’s Law are premier, that all scripture ties together, that we must hold tight to God and refrain from other gods, and that we should not get so deep into the minutia of the Law that we forget that its highest calling is to love both God and neighbor without exclusion.

Paul helps us understand the usefulness of the Law when he claims that its primary role is to convince us of our deep need for salvation and grace from God through Jesus Christ (Romans, especially 3:20, 4:13, 5:20, 8:2). Each epistle writer helps us understand our need for salvation through Jesus Christ by appealing through God’s Hebraic Law, as above, or by God’s general revelation. In keeping with Isaiah’s example (40:21), Paul speaks through what we see in creation (1 Corinthians 15:40ff).

Jesus and the epistle writers admonished and exhorted their listeners to truly follow the ways of God. Jesus most often spoke to his disciples in these ways—the intimate teachings of a master with students (Matthew 13:36ff). However, Jesus also

included outside listeners (Matthew 5:21ff and many others). He reserved his harshest admonitions for those who were unwilling to listen because they thought they were already righteous (Matthew 23).

Jesus and his disciples set the example for all subsequent church leaders to follow. We are to teach and preach for the benefit of righteousness, always pointing to Christ, and challenging the false teachings of the age.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The author has observed aspects of theological understanding among the people of Beldor Mennonite Church that seem rock solid along with other aspects that are more uncertain. Worshipers at Beldor give the appearance of being over-busy; they are reluctant to devote time for classroom instruction regarding the tenets of their faith. It seems wise to pursue instruction within the context of worship including preaching and other acts of worship. Has research in this area already taken place and, if so, what might be learned?

Searching the Literature for Teaching Faith in Worship

A search of the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary library using search terms “catechi*” for words related to catechism and “lection*” for words related to lectionary turned up no similar theses or dissertation topics.

To broaden the search, the WorldCat.org search engine was employed for English language works for the fifteen-year period from 2001 to 2016. Many matches resulted when either “catechi*” or “lection*” were used, N=285 and N=131, respectfully. However, only four entries resulted when both keywords were used for the period.¹ They focus solely on preaching (3) or music (1) to convey faith. They are included in the bibliography subsection: Related Master/Doctoral Research.

¹ They included the following. (1) David Karl Jacob, “Preaching Martin Luther’s Small Catechism at the Fort Knox Lutheran Service” (DMin thesis, Erskine Theological Seminary, 2007). (2) Jamie Nichole Kohler, “Preaching the Gospel to All: Using Multiple Intelligence Theory to Catechize. Integrated Pastoral Research Project” (master’s thesis, Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, 2004). (3) Daniel W. Selbo, “Sermon Series and Faith Development: A Supplement to Lectionary Preaching” (DMin thesis, Luther Seminary, 2013). (4) Robert R. Wagner, “Recalling the Lutheran Catechism through Hymns and Congregational Songs” (DMin thesis, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 2004).

Interestingly, when the search period was expanded to 1990, a twenty-seven-year period, no additional dissertations or theses appeared. These library searches of unpublished masters and doctoral works indicate there may be emerging interest in the subject matter of worship-based theological training. They also indicate there is room for new research into the topic.

When considering published works in professional journals, individual texts, and anthologies, several documents are noteworthy, focusing on preaching or the worship setting. Several of the catechism articles, whether aimed at worship or the classroom, were by Roman Catholic catechists as they responded to a rollout of a revised lectionary in the late 1980s. Of particular note, yet coming too late in the process of drafting this thesis for in-depth reference, is Currie's *The Big Idea of Biblical Worship: The Development & Leadership of Expository Services*.² That and other promising titles are included in the bibliography subsection: Related Published Works. From these results, it appears teaching in the broad context of worship (i.e., gathering, confession, offering, singing, preaching, and benediction) has merit for both its originality and for the promise of working with an otherwise over-committed worship-attending population.

Religious Syncretism in America

Much has been written about the co-opting of the Christian faith by various outside forces. Three of these seem particularly appropriate to the Beldor Mennonite Church context. First, the result of economic and international political biases inveigling the faith creates a Christianity that is jingoistic and nationalistic. Relatedly, the result of

² David A. Currie, *The Big Idea of Biblical Worship: The Development & Leadership of Expository Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017).

cultural chauvinism creeping into the faith shows itself as a Christianity prejudiced against other nations and cultures on the one hand, or as religious justification for political phenomenon within the U.S. Finally, when non-orthodox religious faiths co-join, it shows itself as a faith amalgam, an unorthodox form of Christianity.

Jingoism and Nationalism

There are many examples in the literature of jingoism. Religious fervor opposing Communism due to its anti-religious credo continues to this day among American Christians, though admittedly it saw its height in the period 1930-80s.³ Consequently, free enterprise/democracy are cause celeb—an economic-political philosophy inveigled into Christianity. Another political pursuit among American Evangelicals is support of Zionism.⁴ It would seem that Israel could do no wrong when it comes to Israel's maltreatment of Palestinian-Israeli citizens and Palestinian lands.

Beldor Church shows jingoism in highly prejudicial thinking against Muslim nations and Muslim immigrants to the U.S., and in their thinking about the inherent goodness of American government as compared to any other nation since America “was founded on Christian principles.” Jingoism is evident at Beldor Church in sentiment by some that America would be justified in obliterating North Korea amid current tensions because North Korea threatens us as “a godless, Communistic country.”

³ Kenneth D. Wald, “The Religious Dimension of American Anti-Communism,” in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 36, No. 3 Summer 1994 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 483-506.

⁴ “Why American Evangelicals are a huge base of support for Israel,” *PRI: Public Radio International*, accessed December 6, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-10-24/why-american-evangelicals-are-huge-base-support-israel>.

Cultural Chauvinism

American cultural chauvinism shows itself in cultural-religious bias against Native American cultures and lifeways.⁵ This author worked with Native Americans for nearly eighteen years and witnessed biases of non-Indians and the governmental-administrative policies that affected Native Americans' lives.⁶ In the minds of many people, if Native Americans would just assimilate into American culture, all would be well for them. It is that form of cultural bias among religious Americans that encourages the subjugation of Native Americans in our 400-year history. A similar example in our nation's history includes the fervor for the annexation of Hawaii into U.S. control. That issue was a surrogate for Christian missionaries to overcome Polynesian religious influence.⁷ Positivistic cultural syncretistic justification, on the other hand, includes the Prosperity Gospel in America;⁸ if poorer nations would only adopt Christian faith and culture, all would be well for them too.

At Beldor Church cultural chauvinism includes the belief that prosperous living is God's blessing for faithfulness, ignoring the implications of billions of poor faithful Christians around the world.⁹ Cultural chauvinism also shows itself as a partial motivator to support missionary work around the world.

⁵ Cori McMillin Waisanen, "Crossing the great divide: syncretism or contextualization in Christian worship" (DMiss diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2010), 14-16.

⁶ The USDI, Bureau of Indian Affairs employed the author for the period 1978-1995, serving in capacities of forester, silviculturist, and land use planner at a local reservation and the national office.

⁷ "Jingoism," *Wikipedia*, accessed December 6, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jingoism>.

⁸ Prosperity gospel is also popular among hopeful new believers in Central America and poorer parts of Africa and Indonesia.

⁹ That thinking is waning at Beldor Church among many as they examine biblical texts and thoughtfully consider the ups and downs of their own lives. Their increased empathy has moved several to more compassion for the plight of poor Christians.

Co-religious Syncretism

Co-religious syncretism includes Gnosticism's creep into the Christian faith for two millennia, which emphasizes the potential for a good, pure spirit over an unredeemable, depraved physical body.¹⁰ There were also elements of Gnosticism in the rise and reign of the enlightenment, 16th-20th centuries.¹¹ Co-religious syncretism also includes the incorporation of eastern religious thought into Christianity (i.e., "Mindfulness," yoga, and meditative practices in worship and devotions) from the mid-20th century to present.

In their "National Survey of Youth and Religion,"¹² Smith and Denton found that theological grounding of American young people is very weak.¹³ Interestingly, their findings indicate the youth they studied were highly conventional—meaning they largely followed the faith of their parents.¹⁴ That finding implies a weak grasp of faith across a large age range of Americans, including Christian believers. Smith claims, "Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith... We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of 'Christianity' in the United States is actually only tenuously connected to the actual historic Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step-

¹⁰ "Religious syncretism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, July 14, 2017, accessed December 9, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-syncretism>.

¹¹ "Enlightenment," *History*, accessed January 10, 2018, <http://www.history.com/topics/enlightenment>.

¹² The National Survey of Youth and Religion included a sociological survey of 3,290 young people between the ages of 13-17 years, and their parents, in all 50 states.

¹³ Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 260.

¹⁴ Smith and Denton, 28, 68.

cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”¹⁵

Co-religious syncretism at Beldor Mennonite Church reflects some incorporation of superstitious folklore (footnoted earlier), cultish ideas, and non-Christian beliefs into individuals’ faith understanding. Television, the Internet, and door-to-door evangelizations are among the influencers. Jehovah’s Witness missionaries may have influenced at least one worshiper’s thinking when he espoused the idea in this study’s survey, that God is made up of a hierarchy of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (with the latter two being not quite God) rather than a co-equal Trinity.

Caution: Not All Adaptation Is Syncretism

The literature cautions one not to paint all adaptations as syncretism. Waisanen studied the differences between syncretism and a more sanguine contextualization of differing beliefs in her pastoral setting on a Native American reservation in South Dakota.¹⁶ She urges patience and forbearance when one examines such vastly different cultures, asserting that believers in Christ from non-Anglo cultures are merely trying to make sense of their new faith within their culture and worldview. Indeed, an honest look into the Anglo-European experience sees the use of Christmas trees and indoor greenery as part of the Christian holiday, which was formerly used in pagan rites. Also, the conventional Roman (Western) calendar date for Christmas is set very near the date of pagan solstice observations. Though Christian proponents would say it was Christianity’s means to co-opt and overcome paganism, non-Christians might receive that with a sneer.

¹⁵ Christian Smith, “On ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ As U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith,” (lecture, School of Christian Vocation and Mission, Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Lectures), accessed January 11, 2016, https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf.

¹⁶ Waisanen, 242ff.

Waisanen would say they are examples of Christian's contextualizing faith amid their former traditions.

There is much to be said about the cultural differences found within various locations in America. Beldor Mennonite Church and its community have a cultural backdrop that is distinct from other cultural centers in Virginia and the U.S. Each setting can nurture both pride and chauvinism.

A Case for Transformative Learning

The theory behind a great majority of adult teaching is “instrumental,” adaptive in nature; adults learning to adapt to changes in their environment—society, workplace, and family. Teachers provide information, skill sets, and a means for student betterment.¹⁷ A newer approach to teaching is called, “Transformative Learning.” As summarized by Dirkx, teachers of transformative learning do not provide different content from other methods so much as they have a different end in mind; to change the way students view their world.¹⁸ There are several strands within the discipline.

Paulo Freire focused on teaching reading to illiterate people in Brazil as a means to consciousness-raising. He worked to increase critical thinking and political liberation by providing information about the world and introducing the idea of agency—individuals shaping their world.¹⁹ Thus, by learning to read his students learned about other possibilities and realities so that they need not be slaves to their present reality.

¹⁷ John M. Dirkx, “Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: An Overview,” in *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, Vol. 7, 1998, 1-14, accessed December 21, 2017, <https://www.iup.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=18335>, 1-2.

¹⁸ Dirkx, 2.

¹⁹ Dirkx, 2-3.

John Mezirow proposed cognitive, reflective learning as means to cause adults to interpret their world:

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking.²⁰

In the context of worship and education this approach helps preachers and teachers understand that many people in their congregations do not accept *carte blanche* what they hear from “experts.” Rather, they recognize proffered hermeneutical assertions in the realm of opinion requiring critical review of the assumptions, basis of biblical facts presented, the logic used, and praxis assertions. All preaching is therefore subject to their review, critical thinking, critique, and approval before they adopt new ideas. This obviously pushes personal agency to its extreme. Though as pastors and leaders we might wish our parishioners would be transformed to our way of thinking, it is not to be. Thus, in various ways we hear the old joke: “I preach and I preach and still they don’t change.”

Humans receive God in similar fashion; acceptance is not guaranteed if God-given revelation does not square with their individual set of preconceived ideas. Inertia can only be overcome if a personal crisis shocks them into putting assumptions aside (i.e., Saul’s conversion on the road to Emmaus). We do well to work patiently in our efforts, as does God with humanity. Freewill, or “agency” as psychologists refer to it, is a difficult barrier to overcome. Transformative learning “includes the idea of people

²⁰ John Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," in *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 5-12, accessed December 21, 2017, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ace.7401/abstract>.

changing the way they interpret their experiences and their interactions with the world.”²¹

As Mezirow and others believe, transformative learning is durable because it is a change in one’s worldview—the schemes by which we interpret our experiences.²²

Larry Daloz believes that transformative learning does not take place unless adults desire to “find and construct meaning” in their lives. The adult learner responds to content through an intuitive desire to move forward. In other words, there must be a notion that old assumptions no longer fit well with current reality. Daloz proposes both content and processes of learning experiences that disrupt old ways of thinking and promote “formation of new ways of seeing the self and the world.” He encourages the use of mentors for experiential learning.²³

Robert Boyd has contributed to the transformative learning movement by introducing a Jungian psychological aspect of making the subconscious conscious. His work points to a self-knowledge that comes through symbols rather than language. “The goal of transformative learning is to identify [the] images that arise within the learning process and to establish an intrapersonal dialogue with them.” It is a process of individuation, a conversation between the conscious and the subconscious.²⁴

The principles of transformative learning include the following.

“Adult[sic] exhibit two kinds of learning: instrumental (e.g., cause/effect) and communicative (e.g., feelings)...Learning involves change to meaning structures (perspectives and schemes)...Change to meaning structures occurs through reflection about content, process or premises...Learning can involve: refining/elaborating meaning schemes, learning new schemes, transforming schemes, or transforming perspectives.”²⁵

²¹ “Transformative Learning,” University of Central Oklahoma, accessed December 22, 2017, <https://sites.uco.edu/academic-affairs/cettl/cettl-tl/TLGuideFiles/2012-03-tl.pdf>.

²² “Transformative Learning (Jack Mezirow),” *Instructional Design*, accessed December 22, 2017, <http://www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/transformative-learning.html>.

²³ Mezirow, 5-6.

²⁴ Mezirow, 6-7.

²⁵ “Transformative Learning (Jack Mezirow)”

In the end, transformative learning is less about making individuals fit into specific congregations, workplaces, or society than giving agency to individuals who can shape their surroundings through their understandings of God.

Dirkx provides an essential warning. “It would be naïve and silly for us as educators to think that we can always foster transformation. It is best to view our role as one in which we enter, for a time, a journey that is and has been ongoing within the individual...with whom we work.”²⁶ Though he speaks as an educator, his statement is true for pastors, preachers, and biblical teachers as well. We join in the ongoing work of God’s Holy Spirit with each person in our care.

Summary of the Literature Review

Christian religious education is not new. It is modeled after Jewish religious training that ranged from young children’s instruction up through ongoing adult education among worshipers. A form of the latter is demonstrated in Luke 4:14-21 where Jesus was asked to read from Isaiah and he provided his interpretation of what he had read.

Modern special classroom-based teaching may be modeled after Jewish religious education called cheders that had their origin in Europe for teaching Hebrew and Torah in the late 1700s.²⁷ Christian Sunday schools had their origin at about that time among unchurched urban children in England.²⁸

²⁶ Dirkx, 11.

²⁷ “Cheder,” *Wikipedia*, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheder>.

²⁸ Timothy Larsen, “When Did Sunday Schools Start?” *Christianity Today: Christian History*, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/when-did-sunday-schools-start.html>.

A basis for this thesis-project is that people requiring remedial theological training are increasingly unwilling to devote more time to the pursuit of theological learning. As a result, Sunday school gatherings are experiencing decreasing attendance.²⁹ This thesis-project proposes that theological teaching can be accomplished in the context of full-bodied worship using materials found in catechisms, theological texts, and worship planning aids. As the literature searches performed for this thesis indicate, while within professional literature there is an emerging interest in specifically conveying tenets of faith in the context of worship, there has not been extensive research on the topic to date.

²⁹ (1) Billy Nale, "The Sunday School As A Viable Tool For Church Growth In the 21st Century" (DMin diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 38-47, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?id=G4UAcnmSXPgC&pg=PA46&lpg=PA46&dq=decreasing+sunday+school+attendance&source=bl&ots=0jeWCxJTp0&sig=vDt3VvIIC-2DmC2JoezRloQnSqM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwith8mAhsjKAhXLez4KHTi1DEAQ6AEIQjAJ#v=onepage&q=decreasing%20sunday%20school%20attendance&f=false>.
(2) Todd Buegler, "Why Is No One Talking About This," *The Network: The ELCA Youth Ministry Network*, December 2, 2013, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://elcaymnet.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/why-is-no-one-talking-about-this/>.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESIGN

Introduction & Purpose

It appears that teaching elements of an orthodox Christian faith in the context of full-bodied worship is necessary, as described in chapter 3, to reach an otherwise over-committed worship-attending population of believers and seekers. Review of current literature indicates that though the effectiveness of preaching has been studied, few if any researchers have examined the catechetical value of intentionally designing the entire worship service as a vehicle of Christian faith instruction.

The purpose of this thesis-project is to improve the underlying understanding of Christian orthodoxy among worshipers at Beldor Mennonite Church. For many, their faith is strong. In fact, there are aspects of theological understanding among the people that are rock solid along with portions that are more uncertain. Such research may have benefits for other Anabaptist congregations, as well as the larger Christian community.

Scope and Process

This thesis-project includes five distinct phases. First, design a lectionary that will highlight the orthodox Christian faith and create elements of worship (e.g.; calls to worship, prayers of confession, professions, hymns, sermon outlines, and benedictions) based on these readings. Second, devise a research method to test whether the use of these resources is effective in teaching the faith. Third, implement these resources in the context of worship at Beldor Mennonite Church during the summer of 2017. Fourth, survey worshipers to test the method's effectiveness. Finally, analyze the survey results

and create findings and recommendations. To protect the identity of survey participants, names will not be retained. Descriptions will be limited to gender, age, education level, frequency of attendance at worship and Sunday school, and various leadership qualifiers. No mention will be made of the participants' identity or appearance and no survey responses will be included without the express permission of the participants.

Catechetical Lectionary & Worship planning aids

This thesis-project addresses the need for theological education in the context of worship. There are two reasons for thinking the worship setting is appropriate. First, the current Beldor Mennonite Church Sunday school program is limited to 39% of those that attend worship. There is one adult Sunday school class and there are no children's classes at this time. While that reality may be in line with broader American statistics,¹ this thesis-project, were it limited to current Sunday school attendees, would fail to reach the remaining 61% of worshipers. It is also possible that current participants in Sunday school have a better grasp of Christian orthodoxy and are not therefore a primary focus for supplemental Christian education. This data point will be addressed in the analysis. Second, Beldor Mennonite families appear reluctant to devote time to additional church gatherings. It is not likely that mid-week Bible studies designed to teach theological tenets would be well attended. Moreover, intentional theological teaching delivered in the context of worship could help to nurture both a deeper understanding of worship and a better grasp of theology.

¹ Billy Nale, "The Sunday School As A Viable Tool For Church Growth In the 21st Century" (DMin diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 38-47, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?id=G4UAcnmSXPgC&pg=PA46&lpg=PA46&dq=decreasing+sunday+school+attendance&source=bl&ots=0jeWCxJTp0&sig=vDt3VvIIC-2DmC2JoezRIoQnSqM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwith8mAhsjKAhXLez4KHTi1DEAQ6AEIqJAJ#v=onepage&q=decreasing%20sunday%20school%20attendance&f=false>.

The lectionary created for this thesis-project was based on catechetical materials primarily from Anabaptist and Reformed traditions. The project based on this lectionary includes themes, preaching points, music, and suggested liturgical texts, as well as helpful references. Though not discretely segregated, the lectionary covers three general subjects: (1) God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, (2) the mission of God, and (3) God's design for a faithful Church.

Implementing the Worship Lectionary Series

The full cycle of the lectionary series was implemented at Beldor Mennonite Church during the period from April 30 to October 22, 2017.² Improvements to the lectionary were accomplished week-by-week as this author evaluated the tools.³

Conducting the Research Surveys

As described above, the topics of the Catechetical Lectionary to be surveyed were chosen prior to commencement of the worship series.⁴ To begin the survey process, this author communicated with survey participants regarding the first topic (God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) on the afternoon of the worship service, May 14, 2017. They were randomly selected to ask for their willingness to participate and schedule subsequent interviews. Several interviews took place during the first phone call. Similar surveys on the second and third topics began July 16 and October 8, 2017, respectively.

² The period included three breaks in the series due to absences by the author.

³ An early edit of the series and documentation was to place the topic of Trinity after discussion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Originally set as the opening topic, the author found it easier to tackle when the Three Persons had already been covered.

⁴ The random drawing of topics to survey took place three weeks before commencement of the series.

Statistical Research Method

In standard statistical research methodology, it is customary to conduct surveys before and after implementation of a given project to measure improvement over time. That was the form of this author's original statistic research proposal. In the statistical research proposal submitted to Dr. Brian C. Auday, Ph.D., statistical consultant for Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, this author identified the limited educational background of his congregation and their apparent dislike of completing written surveys. He included his concerns that administering a detailed set of survey tools would be seen by potential participants as difficult, odious, and perhaps intended to shame them.⁵

Dr. Auday recommended several modifications of this author's research proposal designed to limit the potential negative impact on participants in the survey. Auday recommended conducting verbal interviews in a post-worship survey, where inference of learnings would be deduced. His suggestions were helpful in reducing the negative impact on participants in two ways: participants were free to respond verbally rather than having to fill out paper surveys, and participants were interviewed only once.⁶

Since the Beldor Mennonite Church population is small to begin with, it makes obtaining good statistical outcomes problematic. Worship attendance averaged 24 people per week in 2017. Of the 24-week catechetical lectionary, three topics were selected for

⁵ The author included the following observations in the statistical research project proposal: "Obstacles to the research may include the following. (1) Our congregation is made up of blue-collar families with, for the most part, limited education. About 83% of potential attenders have attended high school or less. That statistic is not of itself out of line with American standards. However, 42% do not have a high school diploma. Generally, reading for recreation is not usual. In fact, reading is difficult for many of them. (2) Getting surveys back from participants is difficult for most research projects. Since the nature of this survey is to test cognitive understanding of tenets of faith, it may seem threatening to the people. If they become threatened by the nature of the survey, it will deter more than the usual to not complete the survey. That segment of the population may indeed be a bell weather indicator of the effectiveness of the lectionary project, so I would hate to scare them off." Indeed, Robert Wenger, district overseer, has had difficulty completing periodic evaluations of the author because congregants do not complete survey forms. He has resorted instead to conducting telephone interviews.

⁶ In actuality, some participants wanted to have the questionnaires in hand before answering the questions.

sampling, a 12.5% sample. The procedure for selection is described below. Given the average worship attendance, it was decided to interview five people for each subject, a 20.6% sample. The actual sampling rate was much higher due to lower attendance on two of the sample days.

Selecting Lectionary Topics to Be Tested

This and the following research steps were completed subsequent to designing the lectionary and worship planning aids. Recognizing that some topics are easier to convey than others, and to counter any preferences this author might have about topics to be tested, three lectionary topics were chosen at random; “God in Trinity,” “Scripture,” and “Justice With Peace.”

The worship setting for the study was Beldor Mennonite Church, Elkton, Virginia. The time of worship was 11:00 A.M. – 12:15 P.M. It should be noted that the full lectionary project was used in its intended order. Therefore, the survey for “God in Trinity” was conducted after week four, the “Scripture” survey was conducted after week ten, and the survey for “Justice With Peace” was conducted after week twenty-three.

Selecting Participants to Be Surveyed

Recognizing that some participants might predictably return more favorable survey results than others, survey participants were also selected at random. Names were evaluated to ensure that a husband and wife were not drawn for the same topic. The author hoped to avoid comparative conversations that (1) if surveys were done at differing times might lead to influenced answers, and (2) might lead to anxiety about

their participation. Unbaptized children under age 18 were excluded from surveying as it was not this author's intent to measure that small portion of an already small population.

Recognizing that some participants might feel intimidated by being asked to describe their faith, this author evaluated each to make sure the initial drawing of five did not include such individuals. The drawing was done, therefore, with the intended prejudice of protecting human dignity. Three people were eliminated who might have felt intimidated by the process.

Description of Survey Participants

What follows are description of the participants (n – the sample) with comparisons to the typical worshipers at Beldor Church (N – the population). A summary table follows. Whereas the annual attendance ratio of potential worshipers for 2017 was 67.6%, the ratio during those summer Sundays was 50.0%. That is a predictable phenomenon resulting from family vacations and summer activities.

Though each survey day had differing attendance, five people were chosen to participate, resulting in varying sampling ratios. Survey-1 had 17 worshipers, a 29.4% sample. Survey-2 had 24 worshipers, a 20.8% sample. Survey-3 had 13 worshipers, a 38.5% sample. The average sample of the three was 27.8%. Because participants were chosen without replacement, the actual sample of the Beldor Mennonite Church population was 41.7%. Therefore, each survey sample was large, and the sample of the church population was very large.

Participants included 27% males and 73% females. This compares favorably with the overall population, which is 33% male and 67% female. Among participants, 93% are

baptized, while 7% remain unbaptized. This compares somewhat favorably with the overall population, which is 83% baptized and 17% unbaptized.

The ages of participants included 7% in the 41-50 year old range, 7% in the 51-60 year old range, 53% in the 61-70 year old range, and 33% in the 71 years and older age range. This compares only vaguely to the general population: 6% are 21-30 years old, 3% are 31-40 years old, zero are 41-50 years old, 17% are 51-60 years old, 8% are 61-70 years old, and 19% are 71-plus years old.

Regarding worship experience, 7% had experienced 0-1 years of Christian worship, zero had experienced 2-10 years of Christian worship, 7% had experienced 11-20 years of Christian worship, and 87% experienced 21 or more years of Christian worship. This compares favorably to the general attending population where 6% had experienced 0-1 year of Christian worship, 11% had experienced 2-10 years of Christian worship, 3% had experienced 11-20 years of Christian worship, and 81% experienced 21 or more years of Christian worship.

Specific to Anabaptist worship experience, a surrogate for testing whether they had increased Anabaptist theological understandings, 20% had experienced 0-1 year Anabaptist worship, zero had experienced 2-10 years of Anabaptist worship, 7% experienced 11-20 years of Anabaptist worship, and 73% experienced 21 or more years of Anabaptist worship. This compares somewhat favorably to the general attending population where 11% had experienced 0-1 year Anabaptist worship, 11% had experienced 2-10 years of Anabaptist worship, 8% experienced 11-20 years of Anabaptist worship, and 69% experienced more than 21 years of Anabaptist worship.

Regarding whether they were also regular attenders of Sunday school, 67% of participants attended Sunday school regularly, and 33% did not. This is quite different from the general attending population where 39% attend Sunday school and 61% do not.

Regarding whether participants were in leadership or not, 20% held leadership positions in the congregation while 80% did not. The general population tracks closely at 14% and 86%, respectively.

Table 4.1. Comparing the survey sample with active worshipers at Beldor MC

Comparison of People Surveyed to the General Population (2017)									
N Population (BMC attenders)		36							
n Sample size (each survey)		5	13.9%	<-- targeted sample of each survey					
AvA-2017 Average worship attendance (2017)		24.3	67.6%	<-- potential attendance ratio					
AvA-S Average worship attendance (during surveys)		18.0	50.0%	<-- actual attendance ratio					
Sn/N' Sample/total actual worshipers those days		54	27.8%	<-- actual composite sample					
Gender		Male	Female						
	Surveyed (n)	27%	73%						
	Population (N*)	33%	67%						
Age		0-20 yr. old	21-30 yr. old	31-40 yr. old	41-50 yr. old	51-60 yr. old	61-70 yr. old	71+ yr. old	
	Surveyed (n**)	0%	0%	0%	7%	7%	53%	33%	100%
	Population (N*)	8%	3%	0%	17%	8%	19%	44%	100%
Exposure to Christian worship		0-1 year	2-10 years	11-20 years	21+ years				
	Surveyed (n)	7%	0%	7%	87%				
	Population (N*)	6%	11%	3%	81%				
Exposure to Anabaptist worship		0-1 year	2-10 years	11-20 years	21+ years				
	Surveyed (n)	20%	0%	7%	73%				
	Population (N*)	11%	11%	8%	69%				
Attends Sunday school		Yes	No						
	Surveyed (n)	67%	33%						
	Population (N*)	39%	61%						
Holds a church leadership position		Yes	No						
	Surveyed (n)	20%	80%						
	Population (N*)	14%	86%						
Education level		No HS diploma	HS Diploma	College					
	Surveyed (n)	27%	33%	40%					
	Population (N*)	36%	36%	27%					
Baptism status		Baptized	Not Baptized						
	Surveyed (n)	93%	7%						
	Population (N*)	83%	17%						
Occupation		Constr. or Bus.	Professional	Farming	Assoc. Med.	Homemaker	All Other		
	Surveyed (n)	27%	33%	0%	7%	7%	27%		
	Population (N*)	27%	21%	6%	9%	21%	15%		

* Attender data are anecdotal judgments.

**Children were excluded; they were not baptized and less than 18 years old.

* Attender data are anecdotal judgments.

**Children were excluded; they were not baptized and less than 18 years old.

Regarding educational levels, 27% held no high school diploma, 33% held a high school diploma, and 40% attended college level classes. The general population of the congregation is 36%, 36%, and 27%, respectively.

Finally, 27% were in construction or owned a business, 33% were professionals, zero were in farming, 7% are employed in associated medical fields, 7% are homemakers, and 27% are or were in factory-type workplaces. The surveyed group tracked very closely to the general church population of 27% in construction or business,

21% professional, 6% farming, 9% associated medical, 21% homemakers, and 15% factory workers.

Conclusions Regarding Validity of the Sample

There are valid reasons to think the statistical strength of the sample does not well represent the whole. For one thing, the population is so small that gaining a sample that carries good statistical confidence is very difficult. On the other hand, a 41.7% sample of the total population is a huge sample. Gathering responses from only fifteen people seems miniscule, but it represents a large sample of the whole. For any sample, the participants should be selected without bias, and that is true for this project. In keeping with the survey method intent, the author “rejected” three persons from the sample drawing because he deemed they would become threatened and embarrassed by having to respond to the survey questions.⁷ It can never be known how they might have answered the interview questions. The author states truthfully that replacement names were not drawn to affect the sampling results.

The sample seems to reflect well upon the population regarding the influences of the following factors: gender, Christian and Anabaptist worship experiences (with caveats for one or more length of years), church leadership, general education, and occupation. The sample is less representative of age, Sunday school attendance, and baptismal status.

⁷ Interestingly, all three persons have been baptized into the Christian faith.

Analysis of the Data

Beldor Population Data

Descriptive data regarding the “population” of worshipers at Beldor Mennonite Church is based on anecdotal estimations by this author from his seven-year pastorate.⁸ Broad data ranges were purposefully used to better assure anecdotal accuracy. Composite data regarding the congregation, such as historical membership levels, was gathered from what was available in the archival records found in the Virginia Mennonite Conference Archives (Mennonite Church U.S.A.) located at the Sadie A. Hartzler Library, Eastern Mennonite University at Harrisonburg, Virginia. The church treasurer gathers attendance records each week; the pastor has recorded them during his tenure, November 2010 through December 2017.

Survey Data of Participant Input

The three topical surveys were conducted as soon as practicable after each respective Sunday worship service. Most were conducted within one week of the worship service. Three participant interviews, however, went beyond the target period due to their availability.⁹

All participants willingly completed the surveys, a 100% return rate. Of the fifteen surveys, only one question from one participant was not answered; a 98.7% completion rate for the substantive questions.

⁸ The pastorate of James Åkerson at Beldor Mennonite Church has been November 2010 to present.

⁹ The second topic survey had two interviews beyond the one-week desired window, and the third survey had one interview beyond one week.

Research Survey Questions

Three separate survey tools were created, one for each of the selected topics. The intent was to assure similar testing administration by the author, where he spoke from a survey tool as a prompt during the interview process. As it turned out, six of fifteen people asked to have a written survey in hand prior to the interview so they could prepare their thoughts. Four of those six subsequently did not wish to be interviewed; they returned completed surveys.

Demographical Data Points – All Surveys

All three surveys had demographic and qualitative information for later sorting and analyses upon the substantive questions. In order to decrease the impact on survey participants, the author completed the entries for each respondent based on his knowledge of the participant. Broad categories were used to aid the accuracy of the estimates. Demographical data points included: gender (M/F) and age (21-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-50 years, 51-60 years, 61-70 years, and 71+ years). Qualitative information included approximate length of exposure to Christian worship (0-1 year, 2-10 years, 11-20 years, and 21+ years), approximate length of exposure to Anabaptist Christian worship (0-1 year, 2-10 years, 11-20 years, and 21+ years), whether they regularly attended Sunday school (Y/N), whether they were currently a deacon, elder, or serve on church council (Y/N), their known educational level of accomplishment (no high school diploma, high school diploma, and college studies), and their occupation (construction, business, professional, farming, associated medical, homemaker, and other). These demographical

and qualitative descriptors were helpful in trying to indicate causation for the levels of substantive orthodoxy results.

Substantive Data Points – All Surveys

The substantive questions are described below. Each survey had five substantive questions that were analyzed. The first survey had a sixth follow-up question that was not measured but was used to encourage added conversation on the subject and provide qualitative insight. Though not formalized, the other two surveys ended with this author asking if they had any additional thoughts as well. The responses were taciturn and seemed to indicate the participants wanted to talk about other things.

Survey-1: God in Trinity

The first survey included five substantive interview questions and a follow-up question.

S-1 - “Based on what you experienced and heard in worship these last three weeks, would you say that Christ is equal with God the Father, or is he a slightly lesser being?” The general answer should have been that Christ is fully equal to God the Father.¹⁰ This was a basic question to discern the participants’ understanding of Trinity.

¹⁰ Orthodox belief that Christ is coequal with God the Father is provided in the following documents: General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church General Board, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), Article 1; Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the “Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist-Related Churches* (New York: Good Books, 2015), 19-22; Joseph Stump, *An Explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 69; Andrew Kuyvenhoven, *Comfort & Joy: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), 53-57; Timothy Keller and Sam Shammas, *New City Catechism* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2012), 12-19; and Donald K. McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 24.

S-2 - “Who created the world? Was it God the Father, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, or was it all of them?” The answer should have been something to the effect that all three were present in the Creation event, as spoken of in Genesis 1 and John 1. The question teases out a finer point that God in three persons participated in Creation as professed in several confessions/creeds.¹¹ Surfacial readings of the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds, Luther’s Small Catechism, and Heidelberg Catechism seem to lay Creation solely at the feet of God the Father, but those documents’ treatment of Trinity also pulls all Three Persons into the creative act.¹² In the worship experience of Creation, as well as the prior Sundays that dwelled on God the Father, God in Christ, and God in Holy Spirit, respectively, the involvement of all three beings in Creation was spoken of, with scriptural citations.

S-3 - “Some people say that Christ was a great Prophet but that we should not consider him to be God. Would you agree with that or would you say that Christ is God?” The answer should have been that Christ is God, part of the godhead. This, like the earlier substantive questions focused on the basis of Trinity. It attempted to get at whether the participant was affected by the teachings of Jehovah’s Witnesses, on the one hand, and Latter Day Saints, on the other.

S-4 - “If Christ gave us each the Holy Spirit, does that mean the Holy Spirit is less important than Christ and God the Father?” The answer should have been that the Holy Spirit has the same stature as God the Father and God the Son. This too attempted to determine impacts of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter Day Saints, and even Muslim teachings.

¹¹ Orthodox belief is noted in *Confession of Faith*, article 1; McKim, 24; and Neufeld, 19-22.

¹² Orthodox belief is noted in Stump, 69; Kuyvenhoven, 53-57; and Keller and Shammus, 12-19.

S-5 - “If God is in control of all things, does that mean God causes evil to occur?”

This is admittedly a thorny theological issue.¹³ The author was trying to determine the extent of belief in a radical form of Reformed thinking. The general answer should have been no, God is aware of all things but by God’s nature God cannot do anything evil.

The following question was not measured for orthodoxy. It was included to open the door for further discussion. “Based on what you experienced and heard in worship these last three weeks, was anything surprising about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” This question was also aimed at determining if new learnings could be attributed to the lectionary series.

Survey-2: Scripture

The second survey included five substantive interview questions.

S-1 - “Based on what you experienced and heard in worship this week, is all scripture inspired by God?” The orthodox view would be in the affirmative that all scripture is inspired by God.¹⁴ The intent was to learn what the survey participants thought about scripture, and learn if the word “inspired” had been adequately covered in worship. The intended answer should have been that yes, all scripture is inspired by God.

S-2 - “Can fictional stories, like parables, tell a major truth? (If the Prodigal Son parable never actually happened, can it tell us a truth about God?)” The general answer should have been that Jesus intended his parables to tell great truths. The question aimed at learning if an over-broad literalism is a factor at Beldor Church. There is a strong

¹³ God does not cause evil is noted in *Confession of Faith*, 10-12, 89-92, Christian Reformed Church, “The Heidelberg Catechism” in *Psalter Hymnal (Centennial Edition): Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959), Q6, and McKim, 26-27.

¹⁴ That scripture is inspired by God is noted in 2 Timothy 3:16 as well as *Confession of Faith*, 21-24; Neufeld, 73-93; Stump, 21; McKim, 13; Kuyvenhoven, 45-51; and Keller and Shammus, 89-90.

strand of literalism at Beldor Church. This question aimed to startle those that would define their literalism to mean every story actually happened. It was also intended to broaden their thinking in the course of the survey regarding the value of story.¹⁵

S-3 - “What does it mean to look through the lens of Jesus Christ to understand scripture?” This question focused on a particular catch phrase encapsulating an Anabaptist understanding of scripture where there is no belief in epochs of time and applicability of scriptural truths but rather, a focus on the primacy of Jesus Christ as the authoritative interpreter of all scripture.¹⁶ One confession statement reads: “We seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church.” The concept of Jesus Christ being the translator and teacher of the intent of all scripture is not new to the worship attenders at Beldor Church. Still, the question was intended to learn whether this concept and its jargon term needs further instruction among worshipers. The answer should have been that when we find passages at odds with other passages, or find passages at variance with what Jesus taught, we do well to understand Christ’s words and seek the Holy Spirit to inform our thinking about the others. Christ’s teaching is our premier avenue for understanding all scripture.

S-4 - “If we read the same piece of scripture in January of two different years, is it possible that we will learn two different lessons from our reading?” The general answer should have been yes, scripture contains God’s truth for our lives, and the Holy Spirit guides our thinking of what we may gather and understand. God gives us the Holy Spirit to interpret scripture’s truth for our time. This question gets at the point that the Holy Spirit leads our thinking in certain pathways at certain times, and that scripture can be a

¹⁵ Virtually all worship attenders appreciate the value of Old Testament stories and the portions of both testaments intended as historical recounting of the saints.

¹⁶ That is noted in *Confession of Faith*, 21-24; and Neufeld, 73-93.

constant source of understanding—even the same portions read again and again.¹⁷ The question intended to learn what the survey participants thought about the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. It also attempted to learn whether they thought scripture passages had a single meaning or whether there was room for passages to mean different things at different times to believers.

S-5 - “Is all scripture helpful for understanding God?” This of course comes straight from 2 Timothy 3:16. This question ties back to 2 Timothy 3:16 and citations noted in S-3 and S-4. It attempted to get survey participants to voice any struggles they had with thorny biblical passages.

Survey-3: Justice With Peace

The survey included five substantive interview questions, as follows.

S-1 - “What is the best way to live in peace with other people?” The general answer should have been that we must pray for God’s help to grow generous hearts and daily practice living at peace inside ourselves and with others. We cannot do that without God’s Word and Holy Spirit in our hearts. This question was intended to see if survey participants would tie scripture and theology to the praxis of their living.

S-2 - “To live in peace, we are encouraged to dwell in the fruit of the Spirit. Can you name two or more fruit of the Spirit?” The worship service had included two places noting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The question obviously begged for retention of the list of fruit of the Spirit provided in Galatians 5:22-23. Also, following the prior question about how to live in peace, it was meant to help survey participants tie scripture with praxis.

¹⁷ That is noted in *Confession of Faith*, 21-24; Neufeld, 73-93; and McKim, Q-37.

S-3 - “Violence and war are longstanding parts of human history. Should we not bless national efforts to protect our way of life?” Undoubtedly, some denominations outside the Anabaptist tradition would espouse support of “Just War theory,” which was first championed by Augustine of Hippo. This question had two disjointed assertions: that war in human history has been a constant and that nationalism demands our support of war. It was intended to learn if they supported war as inevitable and needed. Jesus repeatedly spoke of loving God and loving and forgiving neighbors. We are called to live in peace and love, not warfare, violence, and hatred.

S-4 - “Can we strive for peace without having to work for human justice as well?” The question was based on both Old and New Testament references provided in that week’s worship.¹⁸ The general answer should have been that no, God commands us to love one another and strive for justice and peace. The many laws of the Old Testament show us that God wants us to strive for justice for all people. God intends peace with justice. This question attempted to learn whether the survey participants had caught the assertion in worship that peace and justice were tied together.

S-5 - “Does violence sometimes make for peace?” For Americans this is a thorny practical question. Many people believe in the need and goodness for U.S. involvement around the world. It was specifically meant to cause tension in the participants as most people can cite instances such as the Second World War that appeared to stop Fascism and world conflict.¹⁹ The intended answer should have been that God commands us not to kill; rather, we are to practice living in love with spouses, families, communities, and

¹⁸ Scriptural references included: Amos 5:14-24, Matthew 5:38-48 and other portions of the Sermon on the Mount, and Psalm 11.

¹⁹ That is a false and rather simplistic assertion since WW2 did not end Fascism in Spain nor address America’s chosen conflict with Communism. It certainly stopped Hitler and the Axis Powers, but gave the world an ill-founded hope for “redemptive violence” that has never been proven true before, during, or since that war.

other peoples. Jesus Christ's life is our example for living. The question attempted to understand the praxis of faith among participants at Beldor Church.

Survey Responses

Sampling Statistics

The first Sunday of the survey, the theme was "God in Trinity." Seventeen people attended worship. Five were selected resulting in a 29.4% sample. Twenty-four people attended worship the second Sunday of the survey when the theme was "Scripture." Five were selected resulting in a 20.8% sample. The third Sunday of the survey, the theme was "Justice With Peace." Thirteen attended worship. Five were selected resulting in a 38.5% sample. The composite sampling was 27.8% instead of the intended 20.6%.

Survey #1: Responses to "God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"

This survey was conducted after four weeks of worship where Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Creation were covered. The first substantive question (S-1) asked, "Based on what you experienced and heard in worship these last three weeks, would you say that Christ is equal with God the Father, or is he a slightly lesser being?" Three of five participants gave answers that fit within a broad Christian orthodoxy, saying Christ is coequal with God the Father. One person believed Christ is a lower god saying, "I heard from you that they are all equal, but I believe there's the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit [in descending order of importance, authority, and power]." Though it was an unorthodox response, at least by that person's answer one can understand he heard what was said in the context of worship and that the transmission of information through worship took

place. Alas, it did not convince him sufficient to change his opinion. One person did not answer the question indicating she was unsure of her answer. Altogether, 60% of the participants understood that God the Father and Son are co-equal. The 40% negative response (of unorthodox or nil responses) is discouraging.

The second substantive question (S-2) asked, “Who created the world? Was it God the Father, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, or was it all of them?” Three of five participants gave orthodox responses. Two of five persons said that God the Father solely accomplished Creation. Of the latter opinion, one of them was also unorthodox in the previous question (S-1). Again, 60% of participants understand God the Father and Son to be coequal in the Creation act, while 40% did not believe that to be true.

The third substantive question (S-3) stated and asked, “Some people say that Christ was a great Prophet but that we should not consider him to be God. Would you agree with that or would you say that Christ is God?” Four of five participants provided answers something to the effect that Christ is God, an 80% orthodox response rate. One gave the unorthodox response similar to S-1, “I heard what you preached but I believe Christ is less than God”; it was the same person that spoke of a three-tiered god. Once again we can conclude that transmission of information was flowing within the worship setting.

The fourth substantive question (S-4) asked, “If Christ gave us each the Holy Spirit, does that mean the Holy Spirit is less important than Christ and God the Father?” Four of five participants gave orthodox responses that the Holy Spirit is not less than Christ and God the Father, an 80% response rate. One person, the same as with the earlier

questions, gave the unorthodox response: “The Holy Spirit is less than Christ [who is less than God the Father].”

The fifth substantive question (S-5) asked, “If God is in control of all things, does that mean God causes evil to occur?” This is a rather thorny question for all Christians, especially those with a high view of God’s sovereignty. Still, all participants gave orthodox responses something to the effect that God allows sin while not authoring it, a 100% orthodox response rate.

The sixth and last substantive question (S-6) asked, “Based on what you experienced and heard in worship these last three weeks, was anything surprising about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” This does not question orthodoxy directly; it was intended to extend the conversation with the author for qualifying information about the results and to help the author identify theological areas for follow-up in later sermons. As mentioned earlier, participants seemed uninterested in pursuing the conversation. The responses are not measured here.

Survey #1: Discussion

The survey on God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had a 76% rate of orthodox responses. One person provided consistently unorthodox responses regarding Trinity. It will be a difficult challenge to change his opinion. He is a male, older than 71 years, baptized, has had more than 21 years of Christian and Anabaptist worship experience, and seems unwilling to change his mind. Somewhere he has gathered the opinion that God the Father is premier with lesser status for Jesus Christ, and lesser status still for the Holy Spirit. Fortunately, he is not one to speak at length about the tenets of his faith.

Thankfully also, his grasp of the need to call upon God's grace through Jesus Christ, and his understanding that believers are to obey Christ's commands, is anecdotally orthodox. On the positive side, that unorthodox thinker confirmed that the project's attempt to fill the worship experience with opportunities to understand tenets of orthodox faith was not lost on him. There remains the valid question that all preachers must face: How effective is the village preacher in influencing a parishioner's theological understanding?

Regarding the sixth question (S-6), one person said, "...The Three in One, anything is possible." That would seem to indicate an admitted, and understandable, difficulty grasping the concept of Trinity. Another wrote, "I appreciated the realization again that God's love for us is sustaining through Father, Son, & HS from Creation when he provided us sustenance (food) and modeled the community [Trinity] he calls us to." That would seem to indicate a broad theological understanding of the materials covered in worship.

Survey #2: Responses to "Scripture"

The first substantive question (S-1) asked, "Based on what you experienced and heard in worship this week, is all scripture inspired by God?" Four of five participants held the orthodox view, an 80% orthodox response. The dissenter is a male, middle-aged, new believer. He is learning the basics. His interview response was, "No. I wouldn't think so. Some stories are hard to think they're from God." Perhaps we can all understand his shock as he reads through the Bible of some of the disturbing stories related in scripture. The author believes he is malleable and still learning.

The second substantive question (S-2) asked, “Can fictional stories, like parables, tell a major truth? (If the Prodigal Son parable never actually happened, can it tell us a truth about God?)” All five participants believed that the fictional stories in the Bible still tell valuable truths about God and human beings, thus there was a 100% orthodox response.

The third substantive question (S-3) asked, “What does it mean to look through the lens of Jesus Christ to understand scripture?” Though all participants were hesitant in their answers, three gave orthodox answers, a 60% orthodox response. Two other responders merely said they could not explain it, which does not necessarily point to unorthodoxy but to the need for more (or better) instruction on the concept wrapped up in the catch phrase.

The fourth substantive question (S-4) asked, “If we read the same piece of scripture in January of two different years, is it possible that we will learn two different lessons from our reading?” All five participants affirmed the view that one can learn more with each reading, a 100% affirmation of gaining new insights by subsequent readings. One female who is older than 71 years, and with much Christian Anabaptist worship experience said, “I’ve read at different times and realize things I didn’t catch before.” A middle-aged male new believer with little Christian education experience said, “Well, I guess you could. Most stories tie into other points in the Bible so we might understand more because we read other parts too,” which is a true statement.

The fifth and last substantive question (S-5) asked, “Is all scripture helpful for understanding God?” All participants gave an orthodox response to the effect that all scripture is helpful to understand God. A 61-70 year old female with much Christian-

Anabaptist worship and educational experience said, “That depends. It can be. Sometimes we're not understanding it right or listening to the Holy Spirit.” That response appears full of insight and wisdom, where we might also get wrong learnings from scripture without the aid of God’s Holy Spirit.

Survey #2: Discussion

The survey on Scripture had an 88% rate of orthodox responses, which showed strong command of the subject area. It became clear that one new believer needed more instruction in basic tenets of faith. Of the three surveys, the second had the strongest, most orthodox responses. Practically, one might conclude that the village preacher need not pound on each and every tenet of faith but merely reinforce the truths of those that seem understood.

One participant, while responding to one of the questions, said, “I’m not sure I heard you say that.” By her post script, one can conclude that she was recalling the worship service and trying to respond to the questions by what she had heard.

The strong orthodox understanding of Scripture shown in the survey might indicate several things. The participants have a high view of Scripture. They recognize God’s hand in the initial writing. They seem not to question the passing down of Scripture from one generation to another. They recognize the need for God’s Holy Spirit to properly inform their understanding of what they read. And they recognize that the Holy Spirit can direct our thinking differently as time, our maturity level, culture, and outside factors change around us.

Survey #3: Responses to “Peace With Justice”

This survey dealt with the topic of living one’s faith specific to peace and justice. Early Christian creeds did not profess faithful praxis. Rather, they spoke to a set of “head-knowledge” beliefs (as Beldor worshipers would refer to them) regarding God and the Church. Later catechisms and confessions delved into godly living. As an example, one question of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “We have been delivered from our misery by God’s grace alone through Jesus Christ and not because we have earned it: why then must we still do good?” The answer includes these words: “And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.”²⁰ One catechism text asks, “If we are Christians, do we have to obey God’s law?” The pithy first response begins with, “If we are Christians, we will want to obey God’s law.”²¹ Anabaptists speak directly to works of righteousness and service with sections on Christian spirituality, family, singleness, marriage, truth-telling, stewardship, peace, justice, nonresistance, and the Church’s relationship to government and culture.²²

The first substantive question (S-1) asked, “What is the best way to live in peace with other people?” This was admittedly an open question that welcomed practical responses. In fact, only one respondent spoke of anything remotely biblical in their statement, “...Live by the Golden Rule. Live with integrity.” The other responses were of good counsel but could have been spoken from any faith and culture. It appeared there

²⁰ That is noted in Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86; and explained more fully in Kuyvenhoven, 192-94. Independently, McKim, 66-70, speaks of the work of the church.

²¹ McKim, 89-90.

²² As noted in *Confession of Faith*, 69-88.

was a disconnect between Christian orthodoxy and praxis for those respondents. Thus, the question had only a 20% orthodox response.

The second substantive question (S-2) asked, “To live in peace, we are encouraged to dwell in the fruit of the Spirit. Can you name two or more fruit of the Spirit?” Though being asked to recite the fruit of the Spirit was off-putting to two of the participants, all of them gave appropriate answers, a 100% orthodox response.

The third substantive question (S-3) stated and asked, “Violence and war are longstanding parts of human history. Should we not bless national efforts to protect our way of life?” Only 20% of these Anabaptists stood against war, with the others desiring military action to “protect our way of life.” The orthodox Anabaptist responder stated, “I know we enjoy our way of life, but does God enjoy it?” He also told a story about God growing the Christian church in Ethiopia during a time of extreme persecution. His point was that protection might be counter to God’s will in growing His Church.

The fourth substantive question (S-4) asked, “Can we strive for peace without having to work for human justice as well?” All responses could be taken as orthodox, a 100% response rate; however, the responses were generalized and practical rather than being spiritually grounded.

The fifth and last substantive question (S-5) simply asked, “Does violence sometimes make for peace?” There was a 60% orthodox Anabaptist response rate though only one of the three participants specifically mentioned Anabaptist resistance to war. Alas, 40% of responses reflected more of an Americana-nationalist religious faith

described by Christian Smith.²³

Survey #3: Discussion

The survey on peace and justice had the lowest orthodox Christian-Anabaptist response rate of the three surveys, with 64% orthodox responses. The focus on lived-faith did not draw out overtly Anabaptist replies, or even specifically Christian replies. The subject matter surrounding peace and justice, and perhaps Christian living in general, seems to open up rather practical, pan-sectarian reasoning while leaving specific Christian-Anabaptist theological tenets as deep background. This might well confirm the findings of Smith that Americans think in terms of “Christian moralistic therapeutic deism” when considering their role in culture.²⁴

If the Beldor responses are any indication of broader trends within the denomination, it is easy to imagine that the nonresistance stance toward peace will pass out of the American Anabaptist tradition in future generations. It would seem it has already passed at Beldor Church.

One participant, while responding to one of the questions, said that he wished when the author had spoke of Nazi Germany in the sermon that there would also have been mention of American-Anabaptist pacifism during the war. By his statement, one can conclude that he was recalling the worship service and responding to the questions by what he had heard.

²³ Christian Smith, “On ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ As U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith,” (lecture, School of Christian Vocation and Mission, Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Lectures), accessed January 11, 2016, https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf.

²⁴ Christian Smith.

CHAPTER 5

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis-project was designed to measure understanding of the orthodox Christian faith among worshipers at Beldor Mennonite Church. Informed by Anabaptist confessions and Reformed sources, a catechetical lectionary with worship planning aids was created and used to form a worship series that would raise worshippers' awareness of an historical orthodoxy and illuminate the differences between orthodox teaching and extra-Christian beliefs. The limitations of the small survey population caused it to be hard to assert the project findings with statistical confidence. Added to that, the survey questions lacked means to determine changes over time in the participants' faith formation. The research question was: "Is implementation of a catechism-based lectionary with worship planning aids beneficial for improving the level of understanding among worshipers at Beldor Mennonite Church?" As a result of the limitations mentioned, the primary objective of evaluating the tool and method for its effectiveness was not met. There was, however, much learning that took place in the process of project implementation. Those learnings will be described in what follows.

Teaching and Informing in the Context of Worship

It appears from all three of the topical surveys that worshipers heard and experienced the intended teaching of orthodoxy in the context of worship. The effort of transmitting complex theological information without resorting to a classroom setting seems to have merit. The benefit of faith "instruction" in worship seems to engage the head, eyes, ears, mouth, lungs, heart, and emotions of worshipers. It allows the worship

team to convey intended truths through invitation, confession, offering, singing, preaching, and benediction. Though parts of a worship service require listening only, which is passive to the worshiper, the combination of listening, speaking, singing, and offering participation of worshipers has good theoretical benefits.

The art of conducting the worship service can contribute to how worshipers receive and are engaged in active worship. Great effort was made in this project not to fall into pedantic teaching in any of the worship elements. The project seems to indicate that the worship was not diminished nor tainted by an overly aggressive teaching methodology. That is to say, neither survey participants nor worshipers complained about heavy-handed teaching or the 24-part series, which might have seemed long to some people. The sermons, which are the most content driven of worship elements, were fashioned to be classical preaching, not Bible studies. There is certainly a place for in-depth Bible study, but the literature advises against negatively impacting the worshipers' experience of finding and communing with God in worship.¹

It cannot be said from the questions and responses whether the project, using a catechism-lectionary and worship aids, was the prime reason for the participants' understanding. Perhaps better crafting of the questions might have helped discern that aspect. Whether one can sway all worshipers regarding tenets of faith, however, remains open for debate. There will be persons that hold to their beliefs when teaching presents material that seems counter or point in a different way, regardless of the setting for learning.

¹ Sylvia DeVillers, *Lectionary-based Catechesis for Children: A Catechist's Guide* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 3, 21; and Catherine Dooley, "The Lectionary as a Sourcebook of Catechesis in the Catechumenate," in *Before and After: The Work of Teachers and Catechists*, James A. Wilde, ed., (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 42.

Is such a worship series worth the effort? If the local church pastor believes there is need to address core tenets of faith in her/his congregation, then weaving this teaching throughout the tapestry of worship might be the best means of impacting the most people with a single effort. Offering special faith formation classes most certainly will not reach as many people at one time. Also, even if there is no identified theological problems to address, given the state of American culture, it seems wise to periodically reinforce the orthodox tenets of Christian faith. Moreover, the author found it pleasant to go through the worship series. Worshipers provided good eye contact and other affectation indicating they were listening well.

The characteristics of a composite survey participant with the most orthodox responses for all surveys were as follows. They were female (80% v. 68%). They are 51-60 years old (100% v. the next closest at 80% for 41-50 year olds). They have 0-20 years of Christian worship experience (80% v. 75% for those with more experience). They attend Sunday school (82% v. 64% for those that do not). They are a church leader (87% v. 73% for those not leaders). They do not have a high school diploma (80% v. 76% and 73% for those with HS diplomas and college level education, respectively). They are not baptized (80% v. 76% for those who are baptized).² And they have or had occupations in the “Other” type, including manufacturing and service (85% v. the next closest 80% for both homemakers and associated medical; professionals and those in construction fared the poorest at 72% and 70%, respectively). These characteristics became interesting when compared to the latter survey regarding praxis elements of faith.

The third survey measured responses to an area of faith in praxis and had the poorest rate of orthodox response. The survey specifically addressed an emphasized tenet

² This is based on only one participant’s response.

within Anabaptist circles of peace and nonresistance. As noted earlier, support for war “to protect our way of life” was embraced in the congregation, thus indicating the congregation is more “garden variety Protestant” (as one reader stated) than Anabaptist. Other questions about generally living in peace received many responses that could have been given regardless of religious belief or creed. If this particular item of praxis indicates the approach of believers regarding other faith praxes, it would appear that the general area of faith praxis needs emphasis at Beldor Church to help people connect their specific Christian faith to why they espouse practice in lived faithfulness. Refer to the following table that describes the difference in orthodox responses and survey responders for the theoretical and praxis tenets of Christian faith.

Table 5.1. Comparing the Top Characteristics of Participants With Orthodox Responses: Theoretical v. Praxis Tenets of Faith at Beldor Mennonite Church

	--- Theoretical Faith --- (Survey #1 & #2) 82% Orthodox Response	--- Praxis Faith --- Survey #3 64% Orthodox Response
1st	Occupation (Professional)	Baptized (No) ³
2nd	Age (51-60 years)	Anabaptist worship (21+ years) – tied Attends Sunday school (Y) – tied
3rd	Gender (F)	
4th	Attends Sunday school (Y)	Occupation (Assoc. med./Constr.)
5th	Church leader (Y)	Education (no HS diploma) – tied Church leader (Y) – tied

The table above illustrates the differences of the personal characteristics of those providing orthodox responses to theoretical and lived-elements of faith. When it comes to theoretical tenets, older professional women who attend Sunday school and are church leaders return the most orthodox answers. Yet when it comes to praxis elements, the most orthodox are less educated and may not even yet be baptized. It is the great difference in

³ Based on only one participant.

these types of tenets of faith that is most interesting. Regarding the elements of praxis, it may be possible their responses illustrate Luke's gospel emphasis that the high shall be brought down and the low raised up. That is to say, what we may be seeing is that regarding peace and nonresistance, the more educationally and vocationally elite are more interested in protecting the status quo.

Measuring Project Effectiveness

Several aspects of the research effectiveness are worth noting. First, the benefit of capturing insight into worshipers' theological understanding seems to have been successful. Much was learned from the fifteen survey participants on the topics of Trinity, Scripture, and Peace with Justice. In fact, the learnings were eye opening to this pastor, providing valuable information with which to proceed in future teaching and preaching.

Second, the average of orthodox responses for all three surveys was 76%. Though one might hope for a better status after implementing the worship-teaching series, the author now has a benchmark from which to improve upon and build.

Third, there is indication that theological information was effectively conveyed to worshipers during this catechetical worship series. The data are inconclusive on that point; however, on three occasions, a responder mentioned, "that he heard" what was being conveying.

Fourth, the nature of the Beldor Mennonite Church worshipping population makes it a challenge to obtain survey results with statistical confidence: (1) there were only 36 potential worshipers averaging 24 persons per Sunday throughout this thesis-project; (2)

the general culture of the congregation does not care to fill out written surveys;⁴ (3) approximately 33% of the worshipers do not have internet access; (4) there is a cultural sensitivity among worshipers to being examined by outsiders, city residents, and the highly educated; and (5) the research method was specifically created to minimize impact upon this small, sensitive population. These factors made obtaining statistical confidence of the findings very difficult. The samples were large, however, and one would like to infer good results from them. Sampling three of the 24 worship sessions resulted in a 12.5% sample on the subject matter. Sampling five people per week seems a very small number, but it represents a composite of 41.7% of the potential congregation since sampling was done without replacement. In an effort to minimize the perception of an onerous survey, sampling was limited to five questions per person. In reality, five questions could not cover the breadth of faith aspects for a given week.

Recommendations for Further Study

There were aspects of project effectiveness that the small population of Beldor Mennonite Church could not prove or disprove. Conducting a similar worship series at a larger congregation, or at several congregations, might allow for a better statistical sampling that would confirm or disprove the effectiveness of this thesis.

Fashioning added survey questions to discern worshipers' theological understanding before and after the topical Sunday worship would be beneficial. This would require working with peoples used to such surveys, and not threatened by them.

⁴ As noted earlier, the author's district overseer had difficulty getting Beldor attenders to complete a written questionnaire, and resorted to conducting telephone interviews.

It would be worthwhile to attempt a similar study with classical sampling both before and after implementation of the worship series. That would also require working with a congregation that is less sensitive to being surveyed.

Obviously, it is also worth continuing to pursue other venues for continuing Christian education. The need appears great to help the average American believer to have a stronger grasp of her/his tenets of faith. The challenge, as indicated in the first chapter of this thesis-project, will be to find opportunities that fit within the busy lives of contemporary Christians.

Practical Recommendations for Preachers and Congregations

It would seem that many baptized worshipers do not receive ongoing, methodical catechesis once their preparation for baptism is completed. Though continuing education is expected in many professions/vocations, many Christians do not continue faith formation on their own. Remedial, or at least periodic refreshers, of faith would seem to be a wise part of building up the body of Christ within a local congregation. One would do well to use a catechism-based lectionary, such as the one provided in the appendix, to periodically nurture worshipers in their faith. The project offers an excellent venue for teaching core tenets of the Christian faith in a context that worship participants are already committed to attending.

It is essential that preachers and worship leaders do not make worship a pedantic educational experience. Worship must be allowed to dance into the far reaches of mind, body, and soul to encounter and praise God—through invocation, scripture, music, prayer, and preaching. The invocation, invites God's participation in our worship, and

speaks to the heart and mind of the gravity and delight of God's actual presence. Scripture draws the worshiper into God's story of humankind's fall into sin, God's work of redemption, and God's "Kingdom come." Music, both that heard and that performed by worshipers, tickles the imagination through the poetry of verse and note—tantalizing the mind to enter the dance of truth. Prayer, which is considered the most direct link to God by many people, focuses the mind and heart on speaking to God. Less practiced by too many is listening as a form of prayer. Preaching draws people to consider new thoughts and old ones via the intellect and emotions using narrative, detailed insights, logic, and assertion. Preachers and worship leaders, though they hope to elicit musings of God, cannot claim that all such reflection comes from their promptings. The Holy Spirit is at work, dancing where he will dance.

Conclusions

This thesis-project tested a method for improving the understanding of Christian orthodoxy among worshipers at Beldor Mennonite Church. Three factors pointed to the need for such a study: (1) research indicates that American Christian youth are increasingly unable to express their faith in a coherent orthodox way, which reflects parents' inability to do the same,⁵ (2) research indicates that American Christians are increasingly unwilling to devote additional hours of their lives outside of worship to church related endeavors,⁶ and (3) though parishioners at Beldor Mennonite Church have keen interest in the faith, there are theological aspects that could use strengthening. The

⁵ Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

⁶ Todd Buegler, "Why Is No One Talking About This," *The Network: The ELCA Youth Ministry Network*, December 2, 2013, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://elcaymnet.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/why-is-no-one-talking-about-this/>

research questions employed in this project explored whether additional Christian education in the context of worship could positively influence adult believers in identifying and affirming Christian orthodoxy in the Anabaptist tradition.

A 24-session worship tool was created for the project that was based on catechetical, confessional, and theological texts. The lectionary portion included recommended scriptural texts, worship themes, preaching points, and references. It covered three general subjects including God in Trinity, the mission of God, and God's design for a faithful Church. Worship aids were developed to inform worship planning, creating full-bodied worship rather than just a preaching series. Therefore, the entire worship experience for a given day drew from a focal faith tenet. Worship aids included hymns and songs, as well as suggested calls to worship, confessions, professions, offering prayers, and benedictions. The worship tool is provided in the appendix. The full series of worship was implemented at Beldor Mennonite Church during the period, April 30 – October 22, 2017.

Research testing to determine the effectiveness of the effort for improving an orthodox theology among worshipers was fashioned in such a way so as to minimize the emotional and intellectual embarrassment or threat to survey participants. Only one survey was conducted on any one participant instead of a normal regimen of a survey before and one again after implementation. The number of measured questions was kept to five per survey to minimize survey fatigue. Surveys were conducted by oral interview instead of by using survey forms. These measures were received well by the survey participants, but admittedly, the statistical confidence of the analysis was made weaker. It

did not become statistically apparent if theological understandings were improved by the worship series.

There is good reason to believe that the intent of conveying theological information in the context of worship was effective. Several persons, by their comments, recognized the transfer of information.

Worshippers did not complain during the 24-session series about worship being harmed by too much emphasis on teaching. Also, no survey participant raised such a complaint. It would appear that the method and practitioners did well in maintaining a sense of worship not harmed by pedantic emphasis.

There is also good reason to believe that the worship context itself captured the most people possible at Beldor Mennonite Church. Alternatively, to offer the curriculum as a teaching series during Sunday school would likely have reached only 39% of the number of people that attend worship. The effort to inform and improve a general understanding of orthodoxy was therefore maximized by the setting for implementation.

The benefit of transmitting theology in the context of worship seems to work through the head, eyes, ears, mouth, lungs, and heart of the worshiper. It allows the worship team to convey intended truths by several conveyances, including the spoken opening, confession, offering, singing, preaching, and benediction. The context and methodology makes the learning experience more experiential than a typical classroom.

One of the surveys measured the lived aspect of faith. That is to say, the part of faith that has to do with living a faithful life. The survey results indicate that it is an area that needs much work at Beldor Mennonite Church; there was an 18% poorer orthodox response rate compared to theoretical faith tenets. Moreover, based on research by others,

it may be the general theological area needing the most reinforcement of the typical American believer. Survey responses were often practical, but lacked a linkage to Christian underpinnings. Responses were, in fact, rather moralistic rather than faith-based. This was the most interesting finding to this author, and pointed to an area for future teaching and preaching in an effort to connect godly living to Christ's commands.

One survey participant gave evidence by his answers that the transmission of theological orthodoxy does not sway all listeners. It was apparent that he heard the orthodox tenet being presented (it was not missed by him), and he chose to not change his confirmed unorthodox belief. Indeed, there will be persons that hold to their beliefs regardless of the teaching setting or methodology.

There is room for further research on this topic. The same or a similar lectionary and worship planning aids could be tested at a larger congregational setting to garner better statistical confidence in survey findings. Perhaps more importantly, crafting survey questions that better ascertain specific learning through the worship implementation would be valuable. As an alternative, a congregational setting for the project could be found where the parishioners are more accustomed to and/or less intimidated by written surveys, thus allowing for before and after testing.

It appears that utilizing a worship-based curriculum for strengthening worshipers' understanding of an orthodox faith maximizes the potential outreach within a congregation. The approach utilizes a venue of greatest congregational "turn-out." Finally, the approach captures a teachable moment in a worshiper's life.

Final Reflections

Could the author have tackled the research question of faith orthodoxy any earlier in his career at Beldor Mennonite Church? That is doubtful given the personality of the congregation. To survey people's faith is to question it—and in the rather open manner of a research study. It could be taken as quite a threatening or judgmental endeavor. Three things helped the author proceed with the blessing of the congregation's pastoral team and the survey participants. First, at the time of beginning the project, the author had pastored there over six years. Second, the author endeavors to live and work in an open, non-judgmental way while still exercising discernment. Third, the author knows full well that no congregation would have stellar faith orthodoxy outcomes; there is too much impact from unbelieving media and peers upon us all. On the other hand, it should be expected that a pastor's ongoing work, and from the beginning of tenure with a congregation, is to help believers hold on to an historical faith; and as we face a changing world, to faithfully evolve in our understanding of God, God's mission, and what God expects of his followers.

The author fully expects to use the catechetical lectionary and worship planning aids again. It may be an every-third-year project. During the course of implementing the worship series, the author changed and edited the tool in several ways, including the order of topical presentation, the wording of some of the worship elements, and changes in song listings. If other people choose to use the tool, the author encourages them to freely amend it to suit their taste and needs. That is when a tool becomes most useful and lively.

On the topic of faith formation, the author believes we must couch our endeavors in the light of continuing education, which most people are well acquainted with and accepting of in professional/vocational settings. If there is objection in the form of, “Nothing’s changed. Why should we do this?” the author would remind the objector that life (culture and history) is changing all around us and we need to be forewarned and forearmed to those challenges.

The studies and thesis-project for Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s Transforming Congregations has been a wonderful experience of readings and reflection. Right from the first year’s readings, and since then, there have been valuable helps for this country pastor’s thinking, preaching, and ministering. There are important elements for his work as a district overseer as well. The author looks forward to using more of the materials he set aside for future use. He knows that he will recognize implications of his studies for many years to come.

APPENDIX A: Catechetical Lectionary & Worship Planning Aids

for Teaching Tenets of Faith

Introduction

American Christians live in a culture that promotes a variety of religious and anti-religious ideas through modern and post-modern thinking using a host of media. As a result, the faith of Christians can become a syncretism of orthodox and unorthodox beliefs. A sociological study of over 3000 young people by Smith and several collaborators through the years indicates that American Christians' grasp of orthodoxy has degraded to the point that a majority of youth and their parents believe the essence of the Christian faith is to believe in God and be happy and nice.¹ He states, "Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith... We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of 'Christianity' in the United States is actually only tenuously connected to the actual historic Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."² The situation is not new. As early as the 15th century, Erasmus wrote about the need for Christian religious training. One researcher found that: "Erasmus believed the greatest concern of his time was that many individuals who considered themselves to be Christians were ignorant of true faith, and actually were 'rank heathens.'"³

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-163, 262.

² Christian Smith, "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' As U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith," (lecture, School of Christian Vocation and Mission, Institute for Youth Ministry, Princeton Lectures), accessed January 11, 2016, https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf.

³ Jason J. Graffagnino, "The Shaping of the Two Earliest Anabaptist Catechisms" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 45.

Through the centuries, pastors and teachers have attempted to teach their followers the elements of faith in pre-baptismal and confirmation (catechism) classes. That still goes on today, yet it is often the last systematic instruction that a believer receives in her/his faith life. As for special lessons to periodically instruct the faithful on elements of faith, there is growing understanding among church leaders that attendance at offerings such as Sunday school is falling.⁴ Much is written about the frenetic lives of Americans. Perhaps those busy lives translate into unwillingness to commit to yet one more set of meetings.

It is wise that preachers and worship leaders regularly include specific elements of faith in their words for worship and sermons. This catechetical lectionary with worship planning aids was created for a thesis-project. It may be used as a method by which preachers and worship leaders re-enforce basic tenets of faith in regular worship.

Many preachers have attempted theological preaching series. The literature indicates that if such preaching is conducted with pedantic instruction, it affects participants' worship experience, and is perceived negatively.⁵ Those cited say that is not the content itself but the nature of teaching that is most objectionable. Maintaining the mystery and joy of worship is essential while providing appropriate content. They recommend, therefore, not allowing the worship experience to become that of technical instruction. Serious orthodoxy must be interspersed with a light touch throughout the

⁴ Todd Buegler, "Why Is No One Talking About This," *The Network: The ELCA Youth Ministry Network*, December 2, 2013, accessed January 26, 2016, <https://elcaymnet.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/why-is-no-one-talking-about-this/>.

⁵ (1) Sylvia DeVillers, *Lectionary-based Catechesis for Children: A Catechist's Guide* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 3. (2) Catherine Dooley, "The Lectionary as a Sourcebook of Catechesis in the Catechumenate," in *Before and After: The Work of Teachers and Catechists*, James A. Wilde, ed., 39-51, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 42.

worship service so that worshipers are not distracted from the Holy Spirit while still conveying the thematic theological understanding for the day.⁶

Among educators there is growing appreciation for the need to teach with several methods to adequately motivate students' personality and learning types.⁷ Relatedly, multi-intelligence theory advocates instruction that reaches the intellect, emotions, and senses such as hearing, touch, and smell, among others.⁸ Instruction in the context of worship has great potential for utilizing these facets by reaching the intellect, heart, emotions, and soul of the worshiper.

What is presented here, then, is not a sermon series only, but a robust worship series that incorporates thematic theological ideas, from the opening welcome to the ending benediction.

This Catechetical Lectionary & Worship Planning Aids covers 24 Sundays of "Ordinary Time" in the Church calendar to present basic aspects of Christian-Anabaptist faith. As envisioned, it is set in the spring, summer, and fall of a year, beginning with the first Sunday after Pentecost. The full period of Ordinary Time is a little longer than the proposed lectionary. The other Sundays are intentionally left unclaimed to provide flexibility in the preacher's schedule to accommodate local church events. (See the recommended Lectionary Schedule below.) Three winter Sundays at the end of Ordinary Time might also be used for the purpose of filling in topics that were shortchanged during the summer or to include additional aspects of denominational teaching. Descriptions of

⁶ Catherine Dooley, Sr., "Remembering The Future: Memory And Imagination," in *Proceedings Of The 13th Annual National Association Of Parish Catechetical Directors (NPCD) Convocation, March 29 – April 1, 2005, Philadelphia* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2006), 3.

⁷ John M Dirkx, "Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: An Overview," in *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning, Vol. 7, 1998*, 1-14, accessed December 21, 2017, <https://www.iup.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=18335>.

⁸ Jamie Nichole Kohler, "Preaching the Gospel to All: Using Multiple Intelligence Theory to Catechize. Integrated Pastoral Research Project" (Master's thesis, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, 2004).

weekly subject matter and recommended scripture and worship aids for each Sunday are included following the schedule.

As a last word on use of this tool, for those outside of the Anabaptist tradition, one might substitute appropriate denominational statements for those provided here in the “Profession” section of each faith tenet.

Lectionary Schedule

Sunday	Subject Matter	2018	2019	2020	2021
1	God the Father	May 27	Jun 16	Jun 7	May 30
2	God the Son / Christ	Jun 3	Jun 23	Jun 14	Jun 6
3	God the Holy Spirit	Jun 10	Jun 30	Jun 21	Jun 13
4	God In Trinity	Jun 17	Jul 7	Jun 28	Jun 20
5	God's Creation	Jun 24	Jul 14	Jul 5	Jun 27
6	Sin & Death	Jul 1	Jul 21	Jul 12	Jul 4
7	Mercy/Grace/Salvation	Jul 8	Jul 28	Jul 19	Jul 11
8	God's Mission	Jul 15	Aug 4	Jul 26	Jul 18
9	Faith/Baptism	Jul 22	Aug 11	Aug 2	Jul 25
10	Scripture	Jul 29	Aug 18	Aug 9	Aug 1
11	God's Church	Aug 5	Aug 25	Aug 16	Aug 8
12	The Commands-1	Aug 12	Sept 1	Aug 23	Aug 15
13	The Commands-2	Aug 19	Sept 8	Aug 30	Aug 22
14	Our Lord's Prayer	Aug 26	Sept 15	Sept 6	Aug 29
15	Confession	Sept 2	Sept 22	Sept 13	Sept 5
16	Reform to Follow Christ	Sept 9	Sept 29	Sept 20	Sept 12
17	Discerning the Way	Sept 16	Oct 6	Sept 27	Sept 19
18	Communion/Foot Wash.	Sept 23	Oct 13	Oct 4	Sept 26
19	God's Gifted People	Sept 30	Oct 20	Oct 11	Oct 3
20	Called Out of the World	Oct 7	Oct 27	Oct 18	Oct 10
21	In Thanks-Open Hands	Oct 14	Nov 3	Oct 25	Oct 17
22	In Thanks-Stewardship	Oct 21	Nov 10	Nov 1	Oct 24
23	Justice with Peace	Oct 28	Nov 17	Nov 8	Oct 31
24	What We Await	Nov 4	Nov 24	Nov 15	Nov 7
25	(As needed)		Jan 13	Jan 12	Jan 10
26	(As needed)		Jan 20	Jan 19	Jan 17
27	(As needed)		Jan 27	Jan 26	Jan 24

Lectionary Outline With Worship planning aids

Sunday 1 – God the Father

Theme:

We know God by God's attributes.

Scripture:

Exodus 3:13-15; 20:1-6; 34:5-7 / Deuteronomy 6:4

Psalm 25:4-10; 68:5

1 John 4:7-12, 16

Matthew 5:48

Preaching Points:

Attributes of God

Helpful Sources:⁹

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 1¹⁰

Global Anabaptists, #1¹¹

The Attributes of God, Volume I with Study Guide¹²

Claiming Faith, Session 2¹³

Heidelberg Catechism, #6, 11-12, 26¹⁴

What We Believe Together, p. 19-36¹⁵

New City, p. 12-13¹⁶

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 27¹⁷

Luther's Small Catechism, Part II-Creed, First Article-Of Creation¹⁸

Suggested Hymns/Worship Songs:

Holy, Holy, Holy (v. 1, 2, 6)

All People That On Earth Do Dwell

⁹ Citations are provided on first appearance only in the 24-part series.

¹⁰ General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church General Board, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), Article 1.

¹¹ "Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists," (pamphlet, Mennonite World Conference: A Community of Anabaptist-related Churches, Kitchener, Ontario: Mennonite World Conference, March 15, 2006), #1.

¹² A. W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God, Volume I with Study Guide* (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 2003).

¹³ Mennonite Church USA, *Claim(ing) Faith: Youth Discover the Confession of Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2013), session 2.

¹⁴ Christian Reformed Church, "The Heidelberg Confession," in *Psalter Hymnal (Centennial Edition): Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959), #6, 11-12, 26.

¹⁵ Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the "Shared Convictions" of Anabaptist-Related Churches* (New York: Good Books, 2015), 19-36.

¹⁶ Timothy Keller and Sam Shammas, *New City Catechism* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2012), 12-13.

¹⁷ Donald K. McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 27.

¹⁸ Joseph Stump, *An Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), Part II.

Great is the Lord
God of Grace and God of Glory
Immortal, Invisible
All Creatures of Our God and King
B/G:¹⁹ Farther Along
B/G: He's Right On Time

Call to Worship:

L: Come. Worship the King!

P: It is right to bring praise the Lord Our God.

L: Come. Find your way to the Assembly of Believers.

P: It is right to worship God the Father with singing and praise!

Confession and Absolution:

L: Father, you created us for your fellowship.

P: Please forgive us for neglecting our time with you.

L: Father, please forgive our hiding from you.

P: Forgive us and bring us into fellowship

so that we may learn and walk in your ways.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: Draw us to yourself and fill us with desire to please you.

All: Thank you Lord God, our Father, for your mercy.

Please walk with us so that we may know you and become more like you.

L: God promised "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."
People of God, you can live in newness of life.

Offering Prayer:

Lord Our God, you are wholly good, and full of justice and mercy.

Your graciousness to all things is seen in nature, and the seasons, and in scripture.

Please fill us with your great love and help us to grow the desire to be like you,
full of mercy and grace toward others, both here and far away. Amen.

Benediction:

As Isaiah proclaimed, may you go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
may the mountains and the hills before you burst into song;
and may all the trees of the field clap their hands in praise
of our Lord, God and Father.²⁰

¹⁹ "B/G" means bluegrass and gospel hymns and songs.

²⁰ Isaiah 55:12.

Sunday 2 – God the Son / Christ

Themes:

Christ is God.

Christ fulfills several eternal roles (Messiah/Christ, Savior, Lord, High Priest, Sacrifice/Lamb, and Judge).

Scripture:

Isaiah 40:1-11 / Isaiah 11

Psalms 2

Hebrews 1-3; 4:14-5:10; 7-10 / Romans 3:21-26 / Colossians 1:15-17

John 1; 5:19-29; 15:1-17 / Matthew 16:1-20; 23:37

Preaching Points:

Attributes of God

Messiah / Christ /

Lamb of God

Lord

Son of Man (Ezekiel, Daniel, gospels) / Son of God (what others said of him in gospels and epistles, except in Jesus' words of John's gospel)

As a hen gathers her chicks

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 2

Global Anabaptists, #2

God's Story, Ch. 4²¹

Claiming Faith, Session 2

Heidelberg Catechism, #29-52

What We Believe Together, p. 37-58

New City, p. 48-57, 102-107

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 29-36

Luther's Small Catechism, Part II-Creed, Second Article-Of Redemption

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Joy to the World

All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

Crown Him With Many Crowns

Fairest Lord Jesus

Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness

Worthy Is the Lamb

B/G: Good News

B/G: Purple Robe

B/G: What A Friend We Have in Jesus

²¹ Michele Herschberger, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith & Life* (Scottsdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2013), ch. 4.

Call to Worship:

L: Hail the power of Jesus' name!

P: We praise you, Lord Jesus Christ.

L: Praise our Lord and King.

P: You call us to worship, Lord Jesus. We praise you.

L: Our Lord promised to join those that gather in his name.

**All: Thank you Lord Jesus Christ. You are the One that brings us life
and hope and joy.**

We call upon your powerful name, Lord Jesus Christ.

Confession and Absolution:

L: Lord Jesus Christ, you call us to live lives of great hope and love.

P: Please forgive us for closing our eyes to your love.

L: Lord Jesus Christ, you call us to speak of what we know
of you with others.

P: Please forgive us for stopping up our hearts and mouths.

L: Dear Lord Jesus Christ, prepare our hearts to meet you.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: Lord Jesus Christ, you call us to live lives of service to others
and all creation.

P: Please help move us from thinking only of ourselves.

All: You are the One that makes our hope and joy in life possible.

Thank you for your great love, Lord Jesus Christ.

L: As we confess our sins, God is merciful and just to forgive us
all our unrighteousness. Live in newness of life.

Offering Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, it is through you that we have life and hope and joy.

Help us to understand that all life depends on your mercy and grace.

Grow our hearts so that we are as open-handed with possessions
as you were in giving them to us.

We thank you now with our gifts. Amen.

Benediction:

As scripture says: Now to him who is able to keep you from falling,
and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory
with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now
and forever. Amen.²²

Sunday 3 – God the Holy Spirit

Themes:

God's Holy Spirit is purveyor of grace.

²² Jude 24-25.

God's Holy Spirit is our counselor and guide.

Scripture:

Isaiah 63:7-14

Psalms 139

Acts 1:16; 2:4, 17-18; 5:32 / Romans 7:5-6; 8:1-5, 9, 26 /

1 Corinthians 12:1-14 / James 4:4-6 / 2 Peter 1:19-21

Matthew 28:19 / Mark 1:8; 13:11 / John 14:26; 16:13

Preaching Points:

Attributes of God (omnipresence, mercy, grace, holiness)

Nicene Creed

The Holy Spirit is our counselor, interpreter, and inspiration.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 3

Global Anabaptists, #3 & #5

God's Story, Ch. 6

Claiming Faith, Session 2

Heidelberg Catechism #53, 25, 65, 67, 69, 86

What We Believe Together, p. 59-72

New City, p. 80-82

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 45-47, 50-52

Luther's Small Catechism, Part II-Creed, Third Article-Of Sanctification

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Breathe on Me Breath of God

Spirit of the Living God

Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart

Set My Soul Afire

Revive Us Again

Sweet, Sweet Spirit

B/G: Just A Closer Walk

B/G: I Saw the Light

B/G: The Touch of God's Hand

Call to Worship:

L: Our Lord promised to be with us as we gather.

P: We come to worship the Lord our God.

We thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit to guide us.

All: Praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Confession and Absolution:

L: Dear Lord, we have sinned.

**P: We follow our own way and do not look for your Holy Spirit
and the Way of Peace. Please forgive us.**

L: We have not looked for signs of your Holy Spirit in our lives.

**P: Please open our eyes. We find enemies every day
and do not look for your image in everyone we meet.
Help us to find hope.**

[Moment of silent confession]

L: We look to you, Lord.

All: You are the One who can cure us from sin.

You are the One who leads us to peace. Help us to follow your Spirit.

Thank you for your presence. Amen.

L: God promised "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just
and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."
People of God, you can live in newness of life.

Offering Prayer:

We thank you, Lord, for your open-handed giving of everything we have.

We thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit among us.

Help us be as open-handed in our thanks as you are with us every day.

Thank you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Benediction:

May God's Holy Spirit fill you with hope, today
and all through your week.

May you find God's Spirit as you work in Christ's way of peace.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine
upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance
upon you, and give you peace. Amen.

Sunday 4 – God in Trinity

Theme:

We worship One Holy God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit eternally.

Scripture:

Genesis 1-2; 3:20-24

Psalm 8

Romans 8:26 / Acts 10 / Ephesians 3:14-19 / 1 John 4:7-21 /

2 Corinthians 13:13

John 1:11-5, 14, 16, 18; 14:9; 16:12-15; 20:19-23 / Matthew 28:19

Preaching Points:

Though we confess that God is One in Three Persons, it is a mystery.

God's attributes are fully displayed in the Trinity of God.

We know God by what God shows us in Scripture and the inklings
within us provided by God's Holy Spirit.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 1
Global Anabaptists, #1
Apostles' Creed
Nicene Creed
Heidelberg Catechism, #25-26
New City, p. 14-15
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 23-24
Luther's Small Catechism, Part II-Creed

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Holy, Holy
Holy, Holy, Holy
Come, Thou Almighty King
Father, I Adore You
Glorify Thy Name
B/G: [Do You Know the] Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Call to Worship:

L: We worship you, Lord God Almighty.
P: We praise you Father; you are Creator and Sustainer of all things.
L: We worship you, Lord Jesus Christ.
P: We praise you Lord Jesus Christ, Creator, Shepherd, and Savior.
L: We worship you, Eternal One in Three;
Thy Holy Spirit urges us onward.
P: We worship you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
You call the ungodly to be holy.
You call humankind into fellowship.
You guide and comfort believers each day of their lives.
All: We worship you Eternal One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Confession and Absolution:

L: Dear Lord God, we do not understand your ways.
P: You are too great for us to fully know.
L: Our selfishness leads us into sin.
P: Please forgive us.
L: We confess that we have sinned against you and against your creation.
[Moment for silent confession]
L: Thank-you, Lord God, for your gift of life.
P: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for saving us from our sin
and for sending your Spirit to convict, comfort, and guide us.
All: Without your help, Eternal One in Three,
we could not walk in your Way. Help us follow you faithfully.
L: 1 John 1:9 says "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just
and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."
People of God, you can live secure in God's promise.

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord God, you have created all things,
and your Word makes them good.
You created all creatures, waters, earth, and sky, all space, stars,
and planets, and all the ingredients that make them possible.
By your gracious hand you sustain us.
Help us to be thankful and as open-handed with your gifts,
and loving toward others, as you are with us. Amen.

Benediction:

Go in the power of God knowing you are loved.
Go in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
with the mission to obey the Lord your God all the days of your lives.

Sunday 5 – God’s Creation

Theme:

God made all things good—declaring them so.

Scripture:

Genesis 1-2 / Deuteronomy 4:32
Psalm 104; 136; 148
Colossians 1:15-17 / 1 Timothy 4:4
John 1:1-4, 9-11

Preaching Points:

God made all things
God spoke and all was made
God declared all things good.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 5
Global Anabaptists, #7
God’s Story, Ch. 1
Claiming Faith, Sessions 2 & 3
Heidelberg Catechism, #26-28
New City, p. 16-17, 18-19, 60-61
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 25-26
Luther’s Small Catechism, Part II-Creed, First Article-Of Creation

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Great is the Lord
All Creatures of Our God and King
All Things Bright and Beautiful

All Creatures of Our God and King
Morning Has Broken
He's Got the Whole World in His Hands
B/G: I Am a Pilgrim
B/G: The Touch of God's Hand

Call to Worship:

L: This is the day the Lord has made.

P: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

L: God has made us.

P: God has made all things and all the elements to make all things.

**All: Great is the Lord God Almighty, and Jesus Christ the Son,
and God's Holy Spirit. God created us and we are the Lord's.**

Confession and Absolution:

L: It is time to confess our sins.

**P: Dear Lord God Almighty, we forget that you made us
and we are yours. We are not our own. Please forgive us.**

L: We have indeed acted as if we are gods, not bowing to your authority.

P: Please forgive us.

L: There are times that we forget that you gave us a job to cherish
and care for your creation.

P: Please forgive us.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: The Lord God Almighty is merciful and just.

God will forgive us our sin as we confess them.

Walk now in newness of life, resolving to walk in holiness
and obedience toward our God.

All: Thanks be to God.

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord, your bounty and goodness are overwhelming and wonderful.

Help us to be as open and willing to share your bounty as you are
in giving them to us.

We thank you for life and health, daily food, shelter, and our possessions.

They are all from you. We praise your name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord reveal the gifts you have received from his hand

May you resolve to work as faithful stewards of all creation
for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Amen.

Sunday 6 – Sin & Death

Themes:

Sin brings separation from God and death.

Sin does not destroy God's Creation, but it mars its unity, beauty and grace.

Scripture:

Genesis 3; 6:11-12 / Exodus 20:1-21 / Isaiah 1:11-17

Psalms 14:1-3

Romans 1:18-32; 6:23 / Ephesians 2:1-3

Matthew 1:18-21; 6:9-15

Preaching Points:

Sin mars God's good Creation.

Without Christ, we are lost in corruption and sin.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 7

Global Anabaptists, #3

God's Story, Ch. 4

Claiming Faith, Session 4

Heidelberg Catechism, #3-10, 87

New City, p. 40-41, 44-45

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 26, 39-40, 42-43, 72

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

I Wonder As I Wander

There Is a Balm in Gilead

Cleanse Me

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

B/G: I Saw the Light

B/G: Did Trouble Me

B/G: Stumbling Blocks

B/G: Never Give the Devil a Ride

Call to Worship:

L: People of God, we are called to worship the King,
Who is and Creator of all things good.

P: Let us draw near to God that we may know God.

L: Let us gather to worship the Lord.

**P: Let us draw near to worship the Lord of lords, King of kings,
and Creator of all.**

Confession and Absolution:

L: People of God, we are called to worship the King and Creator of all,
things but each day sin creeps into our lives.

P: O Lord, our God, we confess that we fell into sin.

Help us to acknowledge our sin to you.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, sin leads only to death, but as we confess our sin,
God the Father through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit,
forgives us all our sin and unrighteousness.
God draws us into fellowship.

**All: Lord, help us willingly draw close to you
that we may know your righteousness and desire to be made holy.
We ask it in Jesus' powerful name. Amen.**

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, sin and death are all around us.
Help us to be faithful members of your army of followers.
Help us be faithful examples of love and light and hope.
We offer these gifts now as thank-offerings for all that you have given us. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now, people of God, knowing that God created all things good.
Go, knowing that we are called to be faithful believers.
Go, knowing that we are called to live and act entirely differently
from the world. We are to live in love, joy peace, patience, kindness,
goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Go, in God's
power. Amen.

Sunday 7 – Mercy/Grace/Salvation

Theme:

In mercy and grace, God offers redemption from sin through Jesus Christ.

Scripture:

Exodus 34:1-7 / Isaiah 40 / Micah 6:8

Psalms 28; 136

Romans 3:21-26; 7:21-8:4 / 1 Timothy 1:12-16 / Hebrews 4:15-16

John 3:16-21

Preaching Points:

God loves the whole world.

God provided a way out of our sin predicament.

Everyone can come to God through his Holy Spirit; no one is prohibited.

We cannot earn salvation; Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 7, 8
Global Anabaptists, #3
God's Story, Ch. 5
Claiming Faith, Session 4
Making Disciples, Sessions 5 & 6²³
Heidelberg Catechism, #11-20, 62
New City, p. 56-59, 78-79
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 50-52, 55

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Amazing Grace
Behold, What Manner of Love
Great Is Thy Faithfulness
Surely Goodness and Mercy
There's A Wideness in God's Mercy
Thy Loving Kindness
B/G: I Saw the Light
B/G: He Took Your Place
B/G: Just A Closer Walk
B/G: Softly and Tenderly

Call to Worship:

L: There is an amazing wideness in God's mercy.
Come, people of God. Come and worship the King.
**P: Thanks be to God, the One that calls our name,
and bids us into fellowship.**
L: We gather together to sing of God's mercy.
**All: We gather together to worship and adore the One that loves us.
God is full of mercy and love, and will lead us into righteousness.**

Confession and Absolution:

L: God invites us to confess our sin and call upon the name of Jesus Christ
for salvation. We need not die in our sin.
**P: Dear Lord, we confess that we have sinned by what we have done,
by what we have left undone, and by our inner thoughts.
There is no true, long-lasting good in us without you.
Please forgive us our sin.**
[Moment for silent confession]
L: We can rejoice. Those who call upon the Lord Jesus Christ
and confess their sins will not die but find mercy and grace.
**P: Thank you Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
You provide the way to righteousness.
You alone are the One that calls us a holy people.**

²³ April Yamasaki, *Making Disciples: Preparing People for Baptism, Christian Living, and Church Membership* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Resources, 2003), 85-96.

All: We pray for your gracious help to be and become your holy people.

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord, it is mercy and grace that you desire from your holy people.
Help us to be full of your mercy and love—showing the world your
generous spirit. We ask that you bless these gifts to your work.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Benediction:

Our great God of mercy and grace has shown us what is good, O people.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.²⁴

Sunday 8 – God's Mission

Theme:

God's mission is to redeem all things.

Scripture:

Exodus 6:2-6/ Isaiah 44:12-23

Psalms 96:1-3

Acts 1:6-9, 13:44-48 / Romans 10:9-15 / Galatians 5:22-23

Matthew 28:19-20; John 15:1-17; 20:19-23

Preaching Points:

God sent Jesus Christ to redeem and reconcile the world to himself.
As believers we are no longer slaves but sons and daughters,
heirs of the King.
We are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ
in order to reconcile the world to God.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 10

Global Anabaptists, #7

God's Story, Ch. 8

Claiming Faith, Session 8

Making Disciples, Session 9

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 68-70

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

A Charge to Keep I Have

All Creatures of Our God and King

Go Tell It On the Mountain

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation

²⁴ Micah 6:8.

Doxology
We've A Story to Tell to the Nations
B/G: Working On A Building
B/G: Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown

Call to Worship:

L: Come, people of God; there's work to be done.

P: Come, let us worship the Lord as we prepare to serve our Lord.

Confession and Absolution:

L: People of God, sins mar our armor.

P: The Lord knows us. God knows our sin; and yet there is hope.

God calls us a holy people, set aside for his service.

**Let us confess our sin that we may be made whole and complete
to do God's work.**

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, our Lord God is merciful and just to forgive us all our
unrighteousness as we confess our sin.

Walk forward in newness of life to serve the Lord.

All: Praise be to God, the Almighty and Gracious.

Help us now, Lord, to serve you well in Jesus' powerful name. Amen.

Offering Prayer:

In the entire world there is no god but you Lord, God Almighty.

We thank you for your unending love. We revel in your wonderful mercy
and grace. Help us, Lord Jesus, to resemble your personality of love,
mercy, and grace. Thank you for all good gifts.

Please accept these offerings as our thanks to you.

We praise you, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Benediction:

L: Go now, people of God; may you return to your work in good cheer.

Be the called and set-aside people of God—reconciling the world to God.

P: We go—fitted for work in the Kingdom.

L: There's work to be done!

P: We go—in service to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sunday 9 – Faith/Baptism

Theme:

The Holy Spirit leads us into faith,
and we respond by dedicating our lives to Christ.

Scripture:

Numbers 5:5-10

Psalm 51:1-12

Romans 3:21-26 / Hebrews 11 / James 1-2

Matthew 23:23; 25:31-46; 28:18-20 / Mark 1:1-5 / Luke 3:3:9-11 /

John 3:11; 14:21-24

Preaching Points:

Faith is the decision to follow Christ in a long, sustained manner.

Our faith is given and nurtured by the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is an outward sign of beginning to walk with Jesus Christ,
as with marriage.

Faith carries us forward into actions for the Kingdom of God.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 8, 11

Global Anabaptists, #3

God's Story, Ch. 4 & 5

Claiming Faith, Session 6

Making Disciples, Session 1

Heidelberg Catechism, #20-24, 65, 67-73, 87

New City, p. 46-47, 56-59, 62-73, 93-95, 109-110

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 56-57, 79-80

Luther's Small Catechism, Part IV-The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

Suggested Practices:

Baptism if possible

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Just As I Am

Take My Life and Let It Be

Because He Lives

I Know Whom I Have Believed

My Faith Looks Up to Thee

Take the Name of Jesus With You

B/G: Good News

B/G: Softly and Tenderly

B/G: There's a Light At the River

Call to Worship:

L: All the people of the world are called to worship the Lord our God.

P: We come. We look to the heavens to find our Redeemer.

L: Jesus Christ has promised to gather with us as we worship.

P: Bless the Lord Jesus Christ. Bless Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We come to worship the Lord.

Confession and Absolution:

L: The Apostle John said forcefully, “If we claim to be without sin,
we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...
If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar
and his word is not in us.”²⁵
We are given the choice to confess our sins or to die in them.

**P: Help us, Lord Jesus, to understand ourselves,
and to know that we have sinned against you
and against our neighbors.**

L: Let us consider our lives and confess the sins that we know of to God.
[Moment for silent confession]

L: In addition to the sins we know of, Scripture tells us
that there is sin in us unknown even to ourselves.

**All: Lord Jesus, please forgive us for all sin,
those we did on purpose, those we did not intend,
and those things we left undone.**

L: The Apostle John said, “If we confess our sins,
he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us
from all unrighteousness.”²⁶

All: Thanks be to God.

Offering Prayer:

Dear Father, everything we are, and everything we have, came from you.
Thank you for your gift of life and health and food and shelter.
Help us to be as generous with your gifts as you were in giving them to us.
We praise you, giver of all good gifts. Amen.

Benediction:

May you, the people of God, go out into the world remembering
that you are “in the world but not of it.” God made all things good.
Your job is to help lost ones find the way back into the loving arms
of our Lord Jesus Christ. Go; knowing that God loves you
and will be beside you as you work for the Kingdom.

Sunday 10 – Scripture

Theme:

Scripture is God’s Word for life.

Scripture:

Daniel 9:2

Psalm 19

2 Timothy 3:16-17, Acts 17:2, Romans 15:4, 1 Timothy 4:13, and 2 Peter 1:19-21

²⁵ 1 John 1:8, 10.

²⁶ 1 John 1:9.

Matthew 21:42

Preaching Points:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 4
Global Anabaptists, #4
What We Believe Together, p. 73-94
Claiming Faith, Session 4
New City, p. 89-90
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 11-17

Suggested Practices:

Create a Bible reading challenge.

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Thy Word
Holy Spirit
Standing On the Promises
Wonderful Words of Life
Holy Spirit Rain Down
How Firm A Foundation
B/G: I'm Using My Bible As a Roadmap

Call to Worship:

L: We gather today to worship the Lord our God.

P: Lord Jesus, come among us. Fill our heart with joy.

L: We gather today to hear God's Word for our lives

P: O Lord our God, speak to us through your Word in Scripture.

L: We gather together to give thanks, to learn God's Way, and find peace.

All: This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Confession and Absolution:

L: God calls us through his Holy Spirit and scripture to confess our sin.

P: O Lord, our God, you are holy, and you call us to be holy.

We have not fulfilled our promise to follow you wholly.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: Lord, you set us aside for holy work.

P: Please forgive us for this week's failure to follow you fully.

Help us to rise to the challenge of making your Way our keenest desire. Grow our desire to know your Word.

L: The Lord has promised to forgive us our sin as we confess them.

We are free to walk in his Way and not be embarrassed to speak openly

and honestly with our God.

Offering Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your Word through your Spirit and scripture.

Thank you, Lord God, for the gift of hope.

We thank you for all your good gifts.

Help us be generous, just as generous as you are with us. Amen.

Benediction:

May you find guidance, encouragement, hope, and peace
as you read scripture. And now, the Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.

Sunday 11 – God’s Church

Theme:

The Church is God’s tool for redeeming the World and ushering in
“Thy Kingdom come.”

Scripture:

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalms 103

Ephesians 4:1-16 / 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Matthew 6:9-13; 28:18-20; 18:15-20

Preaching Points:

The Church is made up of all believers.

We are faithful as we obey the Holy Spirit’s lead to speak and serve.

We are called to proclaim God’s Good News.

Our personal gifting of talents is for use in the Kingdom.

Unity within the Church is evidence of Christ’s presence
and his love within us.

Church discipline is needed to maintain righteousness for God’s service.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 9, 14

Global Anabaptists, #3, #4, #5, #6 & #7

Claiming Faith, Session 5

Making Disciples, Sessions 8 & 9

Heidelberg Catechism 91

What We Believe Together, p. 115-128, 129-154

New City, p. 100-101

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 63-66

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

The Church's One Foundation
Go Ye Into All the World
All Glory, Laud, and Honor
All People That On Earth Do Dwell
We Are God's People
In Christ There Is No East or West
B/G: Working On a Building
B/G: [Do you know the] Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Call to Worship:

L: Come, people of God. You are the Church.
P: We come to worship the One that calls us to serve.
L: Come, people of God. You are called to usher in the Kingdom of God.
**P: We come. Equip us Spirit of Christ for greater faithfulness
and service.**

Confession and Absolution:

L: Let us prepare our hearts to receive God's Word. Sin distorts us.
Sin distorts the Church. Sin keeps us from knowing God fully.
**P: O Lord, our God, we have sinned, and our sin causes us
to hide from you.**
L: Let us confess our sins in silence.
[Moment for silent confession]
L: People of God, there is no reason to hide from God.
Your sins are washed away. Work in the Church, with God's leading,
to draw others to Christ.
**All: Thanks be to God. We praise you, good and merciful
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We thank you for your unending love.
Help us to serve you faithfully. Amen.**

Offering Prayer:

Lord, you have called us into service.
We are part of your heavenly kingdom's hands and feet.
Help us, we pray, to be faithful with our gifts of time, health, talent, and
money for your Kingdom come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Benediction:

It is time, people of God, to go into the world.
Carry with you your faith. Carry with you your commission to be God's
faithful people.
And may you always know God's presence in your life and work. Amen.

Sunday 12 – The Commands-1

Theme:

God's Commandments call us to righteousness.

Scripture:

Exodus 20 / Deut. 5

Psalm 119:1-8

Hebrews 3

Matthew 5:18-20

Preaching Points:

God calls his people to worship One God and follow God into righteousness.

Helpful Sources:

Global Anabaptists, #4

God's Story, Ch. 2

Heidelberg Catechism, #92-115

New City, p. 22-39, and 42-43

Luther's Small Catechism, Part I-The Ten Commandments

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 89-90

Suggested Practices:

Encourage listeners to read either Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5 during the week and meditate upon their meaning for life. Why were those ten commands important?

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

A Charge to Keep I Have

Teach Me Thy Way O Lord

Holy, Holy, Holy

Take My Life and Let It Be

Take Time to Be Holy

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

B/G: I'm Using My Bible As A Roadmap

B/G: Farther Along

B/G: I Am A Pilgrim

Call to Worship:

L: We are called to love the Lord our God with heart, mind, and soul.

P: We come, dear Lord God, to worship you only.

L: Lead us Eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

P: Lead us into righteousness by your Word.

Fill our hearts with keen desire to follow and serve you all the days of our lives.

Confession and Absolution:

L: People of God, we have not perfectly followed God's Law.

P: We have not.

L: In many ways we show that our hearts are not devoted to the Lord.

P: Our hearts are bent on pleasing ourselves.

All: Please forgive us Lord.

L: Let us confess our sins to the Lord God Almighty.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, our Lord is merciful and just to forgive us all our sins.

We are called to live life boldly, remembering to confess our sins.

**All: Thanks be to God who forgives us our sin and leads us
into righteousness. Amen.**

Offering Prayer:

O Lord, our God, please accept these offerings from us.

You have given us everything we own, possess, and use.

Help us remember—and be thankful.

Lord, you have said you desire us to be holy.

Help us aspire to be holy as you are holy.

We praise you and thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Benediction:

God's Law is meant for our salvation. It is meant to lead us into holiness.

God calls us to be a holy, called out people.

Let us walk into our living with true desire to be holy.

Go in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, knowing that God
loves you. Amen.

Sunday 13 – The Commands-2

Theme:

The simplicity of Christ's commands call us to love God
and our neighbors.

Scripture:

Isaiah 1:10-17 / Micah 6:8

Psalms 119:9-16

Romans 13:9

Matthew 22:34-40 / Luke 10:25-28

Preaching Point:

God demands that our righteousness be practiced in love to one another.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 17, 20, 22

Global Anabaptists, #4
God's Story, Ch. 4
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 89
Luther's Small Catechism, Supplementary Parts, Table of Duties,
Christians in General

Suggested Practices:

Encourage listeners to meditate during the week upon the radical nature of loving neighbors and enemies.

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Footsteps of Jesus
Where He Leads Me
May the Mind of Christ Our Savior
Teach Me Thy Way O Lord
Softly and Tenderly
Amazing Grace
B/G: Just A Closer Walk With Thee
B/G: Purple Robe

Call to Worship:

L: Come to worship the King.

**P: We come to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
by whom we are made whole.**

L: Come and find hope in the Law through Jesus Christ.

P: We come. May the mind of Christ our Savior live in us. Amen.

Confession and Absolution:

L: People of God, Jesus Christ came to show us the way to please God.
We fall short of his calling.

**P: We have indeed fallen short. We have sinned against God
by not following Christ. Please forgive us Lord.**

Fill us with your Holy Spirit and help us to follow you.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: Lift up your hearts. Our Lord sent his Son Jesus Christ to save us.
In him we are not condemned.

**All: Praise God Almighty who lifts us through the work of Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord God, you have given us life and health and daily food.
We thank you. Please help grow our hearts in thankfulness.
We offer these gifts as a portion of your bounty in thanks.
We thank you Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now, people of God. The heavy burden of Law has been lifted
through the work of Jesus Christ. Go now and practice the Way of God
with the people and Creation you find all around you.
We are Christ's disciples as we love God and our neighbors.
It is God's Way. May you find encouragement all through the week
as you recall his great love for you. Amen.

Sunday 14 – Our Lord's Prayer

Theme:

God's will for us is found in the Lord's Prayer.

Scripture:

Proverbs 15:28-30
Psalm 119:17-24
Ephesians 3:14-21
Matthew 6:5-15 / Luke 11:1-13

Preaching Point:

The Lord's Prayer teaches us how to live and pray.

Helpful Sources:

Luther's Small Catechism, Part III
Global Anabaptists, #2 & #7
What We Believe Together, p. 41-42, 51-52, 104-105

Suggested Practices:

Encourage listeners to meditate upon the Lord's Prayer during the week.

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

The Lord's Prayer
Day By Day
If My People's Hearts Be Humbled
Jesus Loves the Little Children
Jesus Loves Me This I Know
Amazing Grace
B/G: O Healing River
B/G: Just A Closer Walk With Thee

Call to Worship:

L: We gather to worship the King.
P: We gather to worship the One who is All in All.
L: The Lord our God calls us to worship and to forgive.

**P: We come to worship the King and to practice the forgiveness
that God showers upon us.**

Confession and Absolution:

L: People of God, if there are things in your heart
that you need to forgive others,
now is the time to reflect and forgive.

**P: Dear Lord, focus our thinking upon those people and actions
that we need to forgive. Free us from our grudges and hard hearts.**

[Moment for reflection]

L: To forgive others is the hard work that true believers are called to do.

**P: Help us Lord. Don't let us harden our hearts to others—
and in doing so to harden our hearts to you.**

Please forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, may you desire to freely do the hard work of forgiving
others. Jesus promises to forgive us as we do so.

All: Help us, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord, you have given everything we own, and possess, and use.

Thank you. Please accept these offered gifts from us now,
and help us forgive others even as you forgive us. Amen.

Benediction:

It is time now, people of God, to bless the world.

As you find grudges within you towards people and God, may you
willingly forgive them. It is in your forgiving that you will be freed.

Go now; bless the world. Amen.

Sunday 15 – Confession

Theme:

God restores us to fellowship as we confess our sin.

Scripture:

Genesis 3:1-8, 12, 13

Psalms 32:4-6; 51:1-19

1 John 1:8-10 / James 5:15-16

Mark 1:1-8

Preaching Points:

Adam & Eve sinned; as a result they hid from God.

Our sin causes us to shrink from a Holy God.

As we confess our sins, God is merciful and just to forgive us.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 7
Global Anabaptists, #3
New City, p. 74-75
Luther's Small Catechism, Intermediate Part – Of Confession
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 72-73

Suggested Practices:

Corporate confession in worship.

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing
Cleanse Me (Ellers or Maori)
I Lay My Sins On Jesus
If My People's Hearts Are Humbled
Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus
Whiter Than Snow
B/G: Peter Was A Fireball
B/G: Did Trouble Me

Call to Worship:

L: Come, people of God. Come and worship.

P: We come to worship the Lord.

L: Come, people of God. Come and worship the One who knows us.

P: We come to the One that knows us through and through.

Confession and Absolution:

L: Dear Lord...

All: We confess that our outward lives miss your mark of holiness.

We confess that our thoughts dwell on the unholy. Please forgive us.

L: Though we strive to know you and follow your ways...

**All: We confess that we have sinned against you by what we have done
and by what we have left undone. Please forgive us.**

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, be assured that as we confess our sins, the Lord our God
is merciful and just to forgive us all our sin.

Walk now in the wholeness of beauty, seeking God's face and
following God's Way.

All: Praise be to God.

Offering Prayer:

We praise you and thank you, Lord, for all your gifts so freely given—
life and health and shelter and daily food. Help us, Lord Jesus,
to open our hearts to others—just as wide as you have given
those things to us. Amen.

Benediction:

Go into the world knowing that you may call upon the Lord
every moment of your life. God is willing to know you,
and lead you into beauty and love. You are not alone.
In fact, you never were alone. Amen.

Sunday 16 – Reform to Follow Christ

Theme:

The Church was and is in need of reformation to follow Christ.

Scripture:

Exodus 20:1-3 / Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Psalm 100

1 John 2:7 – 4:21 / James 1 – 3

Matthew 5 – 7 / John 1:1-18

Preaching Points:

Josiah's reform in Judah

Nehemiah's reforms in reestablishing Jerusalem

The Church and the period of the Reformation

Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives include:

- Jesus Christ is the lens to understand all scripture;
- Separation of church and state;
- Humankind is called to live in peace;
- The Mission of God is to reconcile the world to God; and
- Christ calls us to live humbly, serve one another, and tend Creation daily.

Helpful Sources:

God's Story, Ch. 9

What We Believe Together, p. 153-161

Adventures²⁷

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 3-4

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

We Are the Church

I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord

Servant Song (Will You Help Me Be Your Servant?)

We Are God's People

We Come, O Christ, to You

Holy, Holy, Holy

B/G: Amazing Grace

²⁷ Jeanne Grieser and Carol Duerksen, *Adventures With the Anabaptists: A Study for Youth* (Scottsdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, [date unknown]).

B/G: He's Right On Time
B/G: I'm Using My Bible As A Roadmap

Call to Worship:

L: Come, people of God, come to worship the Lord our God.

P: We come to worship our Creator and Sustainer.

L: Come, people of God, and find rest for your souls.

P: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for welcoming us into your presence.

Confession and Absolution:

L: God welcomes us into his presence, yet in so many ways we hide
from God as did our forbearers, Adam and Eve. It is sin that causes us
to hide.

P: Dear Lord Jesus, we admit that sin creeps into our lives.

Help us to ponder and confess our sins.

We desire to be cleansed and whole.

L: Let us confess our sins.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, rejoice in the news that God will not remember our sin
as we humbly confess.

P: Praise God, the One who forgives us our sin and transgression!

**Help us, Lord Jesus, to forget old habits of sin and come out of hiding
from you. You are the One that loves us.**

All: Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Offering Prayer:

O Lord our God, you have given us everything we possess in time,
health and possessions. You are the One that brings hope to
all humankind. Help us to honor you with our lives, and with these
offerings. Bless the Church as we bless you with our devotion. Amen.

Benediction:

Let your integrity of faith and living be so evident to a watching world
that they are drawn to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Go in faith, hope, and love.

Serve the Lord. He has promised to be with you always. Amen.

Sunday 17 – Discerning the Way

Themes:

God desires our faithful obedience.

God desires we distinguish true Christian faith from cults.

Scripture:

1 Kings 3:5-12 / 2 Kings 22:14-20

Psalm 27 / Proverbs 15:14
Acts 2:22-39 / 1 John 4:1-3 / 2 John 4-11
John 14:1-14 / Matthew 28:16-20

Preaching Points:

Beware: Satan comes as an angel of light.
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are to be praised as One God.
Faith in Jesus Christ and obeying his commands is our pathway to life.

Helpful Sources:

What We Believe Together, all
Adventures, all
Christianity, Cults & Religions²⁸

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Holy, Holy, Holy
All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name
At the Name of Jesus
Crown Him With Many Crowns
Fairest Lord Jesus
Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness
B/G: Good News
B/G: What A Friend We Have in Jesus
B/G: Amazing Grace

Call to Worship:

L: We are called into the presence of the Lord.
P: We come to praise the Lord our God.
L: Come, let us speak of whom we worship.
P: It is God we worship, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Confession and Absolution:

L: The world presents many ways; all of them false gods.
None of them glorify and follow the true God. We become confused
and follow false ways.
P: Forgive us Lord for letting our eyes stray.
Show us the error of our ways.
[Moment for silent confession]
L: You are the called of God. As you confess your sins the Lord is merciful
and just to forgive you of all sin. May we resolve to follow God truly and
seek God's help.
**P: Dear Lord, please help us discern your ways, acknowledge your
Word, and follow you with integrity. We praise your name,
Lord Jesus. Amen.**

²⁸ Paul Carden, ed., *Christianity, Cults, & Religions*, 7th Edition (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 1996).

Offering Prayer:

God calls us to faithful lives of integrity, holding fast to Christ Jesus.
Let us open our hearts in thanksgiving to God and hospitality to all people. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now into the world recognizing we are called out by God to come out
from the world, called to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ,
acknowledging God's ownership upon our lives. Go in peace.
Serve the Lord.

Sunday 18 – Communion and Washing Feet

Theme:

Jesus set forth two practices to remember him by and to practice his way.

Scripture:

Exodus 20:18-21
Psalm 104:1, 14-16
1 Corinthians 11:17-29
Matthew 26:17-30 / Mark 14:12-26 / Luke 22:7-20 / John 6:35, 48, 51
John 13:1-17 / Matthew 20:20-28

Preaching Points:

Jesus freely shared his body and blood with all the disciples, those who
were faithful and /not.
Jesus provided practices of communion and footwashing for us
to remember him.
Communion reminds us of our dependence upon the Lord Jesus Christ
for salvation; footwashing reminds us of Jesus' command to serve
others, for surely the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 12, 13
Global Anabaptists, #6
God's Story, Ch. 7
Claiming Faith, Session 6
Heidelberg Catechism, #66, 75-82
New City, p. 91-92, 96-99
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 83-86
Luther's Small Catechism, Part V – The Sacrament of the Altar or
The Lord's Supper

Suggested Practices:

Communion (Lord's Supper)
Foot washing

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees
Will You Let Me Be Your Servant?
Break Thou the Bread of Life
May the Mind of Christ, My Savior
Let Your Heart Be Broken
Come All Christians Be Committed
B/G: Amazing Grace
B/G: Stumbling Blocks

Call to Worship:

L: We are invited into God's presence.
P: We come with thanksgiving.
L: We are invited to Christ's table.
P: We come with thanksgiving.
L: We are commanded to learn and do Christ's Way.
P: We look to God's grace to fill us with fear and hope.

Confession and Absolution:

L: As we approach the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is right and
pleasing to God that we confess our sins.
P: Dear Lord, we come humbly to you.
L: Though we endeavor to be true believers and practitioners of God's Word
in Jesus Christ, we fall into sin.
P: Lord Jesus, please help us examine our lives.
Help us to root out all sin that enslaves us to Satan.
[Moment for silent confession]
L: God is merciful and just. God will forgive us as we confess our sins.
**All: Thanks be to God, the eternal One in Three, Father, Son, and
Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord, you gave your body and blood in the form of bread and wine
to the disciples. Help us to live in thankfulness for your wonderful gift
of love to us. You also commanded us to love our neighbors,
to wash people's feet, and serve them as we can.
Help us to live lives that honor you and serve other people.
We thank you now for all good gifts that you have given us.
Please accept our offerings and bless them. Amen.

Benediction:

People of God, we have been given things to remember about our Lord
Jesus Christ. He gave us life, and he calls us to give life-giving gifts
to the people around us near and far.
Go now in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ knowing that he

is with you—even to the end of the age. Amen.

Sunday 19 – God’s Gifted People

Theme:

Each person has God-given talents to use for God’s Kingdom.

Scripture:

Numbers 11:24-30

Psalm 133

Romans 12 / 1 Corinthians 12 / Acts 10:45-48

Mark 13:11

Preaching Points:

God gives believers certain gifts to contribute to the community of faith.

Our spiritual gifting is meant to be practical.

Our spiritual gifting may puff our ego; watch out!

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 6 & 15

Global Anabaptists, #3, #4, #5, #6 & #7

God’s Story, Ch. 2, 7 & 8

Making Disciples, Sessions 8 & 9

Claiming Faith, Session 1 and 7

Heidelberg Catechism, #1-4, 86, 88-91

New City, p. 10-11, 16-17, 20-21, 76-77

Presbyterian Q/A, p. 37-44, 48-49, 71-72, 77-78

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

We Are God’s People

They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love

Take My Life and Let It Be

A Charge to Keep I Have

Come, All Christians, Be Committed

Freely, Freely

B/G: Use Your Shield

B/G: There’s No Better Time Than Now

Call to Worship:

L: Come, servants of God.

P: We come to worship the King.

L: Come, servants of God.

Let us worship God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

P: It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Confession and Absolution:

L: We are invited to come before God to confess our sins.

Let us do so that we may be restored into fellowship and service to God.

P: We have fallen short of God's glory and righteousness.

We confess that we have made our plans first and asked God's blessing afterwards. Lord, you called us to be your servant people yet we have used our gifts for our own joy and have not freely shared them with Creation and your people.

Dear Lord, our God, please hear our confessions.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: O Lord, please hear our confessions.

P: Please forgive us and let us forward into the light.

Help us to serve you willingly, fully, and with great joy.

L: Our Lord is merciful and just, and will forgive us as we confess our sin.

All: Praise be to God!

Offering Prayer:

Lord God, you created us for fellowship and faithful service.

You seek our love and openhearted, open-handed stewardship of your Creation.

Please help us in our tasks, Lord. Help us with our hearts.

You are the One that can create in us true hearts.

We offer you now a part of what you first gave us.

Help us be generous with our lives, our time, our talents, and the wealth we now possess. Thank you, generous Father. Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord bless you and keep you as you serve God's people and Creation by your gifting—in God's blessed name. Amen.

Sunday 20 – Called Out of the World

Themes:

Faithful believers are in many ways different from the world.

The world will notice the difference of faithful believers; that will bring both inquisitiveness and persecution.

Scripture:

Proverbs 9

Psalms 5

Romans 12:1-2

John 15:18-20; 17:15-17

Preaching Points:

We are called to be holy even as God is Holy.

If no one is offended by our godly presence, we fit into the world too well.

They will know us by our love and peace.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Articles 23, 24
Global Anabaptists, #5
God's Story, Ch. 7 & 8
Claiming Faith, Sessions 8, 9 & 10
Making Disciples, Sessions 8 & 9
New City, p. 76-77
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 93-94

Suggested Practices:

Create a moment for bringing slips of paper to the front that describe how we will be different from the world.

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love
Am I A Soldier of the Cross?
Day By Day
May the Love
Let the Peace of Christ Rule In Your Heart
Will You Let Me Be Your Servant?
B/G: I Am A Pilgrim
B/G: Just A Closer Walk
B/G: Wasted Years
B/G: He Took Your Place

Call to Worship:

L: You are called and welcomed to worship the Lord your God.

P: Come, let us praise the Lord.

May our thoughts and actions be acceptable to our Righteous King.

L: We are called to find ourselves in God's peace.

P: We are called up and out. We are called to be holy.

**We are called out of the world. May our words and deeds
be honorable and right before the Lord.**

Confession and Absolution:

L: The world beckons us. In many ways we fit into the world all too well.

**P: O Lord, our God, please forgive us for being afraid to be like you.
Forgive us for desiring to fit into the world.**

L: Life has a way of presenting attractive idols that demand our time.

**P: We ask God to forgive us for placing our hope and trust and
devotion to things other than God.**

L: The world offers pleasures and fellowships that unfit us for God's service.

**P: O Lord, our God, please forgive us for desiring the things of this
world instead of fitting ourselves for your service.**

L: Assembled people, do you disavow your idolatrous hope in money, work, position, and personal and military strength?

P: We do. Help us, Lord Jesus, to be true to our vow.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, as the called-out ones, your security is in Christ.

Make good on your pledge of single-minded devotion to God.

All: May we accept God's forgiveness and walk with integrity of faith and life. Help us, Lord Jesus Christ, to be devoted to you only. Amen.

Offering Prayer:

O Lord, our God, you call us out of the world to be perfect, righteous, and holy, even as you are perfect, righteous, and holy.

We stand amazed at your calling. Help us to faithfully walk in your ways, being as wholly in love with Creation as you are.

Please accept our gifts for your service. Amen.

Benediction:

L: We are called out of the world to serve the Lord and all God's Creation.

P: May we strive to walk with integrity, joining our faith and our living, in Jesus name. Amen.

L: Go. Serve the Lord with gladness knowing that Jesus Christ promised to be near you always, now and all through the week.

Sunday 21 – In Thanks: Open Hands

Theme:

Thankfulness for salvation gives believers big hearts.

Scripture:

Ezra 3:1-13 / 1 Chronicles 16:7-36

Psalms 148

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 / 1 Thessalonians 5:18

Mark 6:41

Preaching Points:

“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness” (2 Cor. 9:10).

God loves a cheerful giver.

The people of God belong to God; they are not their own.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 21

Global Anabaptists, #5

Luther's Small Catechism, Part II-Creed, First Article – Of Creation

Suggested Practices:

Instead of passing offering plates, have people come forward with their offerings.

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Come, Ye Thankful People, Come
Count Your Blessings
For Health and Strength and Daily Food
We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing
God Is So Good
We Give Thee But Thine Own
B/G: There's No Better Time Than Now to Praise the Lord
B/G: I Am Going to a City

Call to Worship:

L: Are we God's People?
P: Yes, we come as God's People to worship God in thankfulness.
L: As God's People you are not your own.
P: Our time and talent and resources are God's.
Help us, Lord to be faithful with what you give us.
We praise your name. Amen.

Confession and Absolution:

L: As God's People, we are called to confess our sin.
P: Lord Jehovah Jireh, you are our Provider.
Please forgive us for the times we held tightly onto the things you gave us instead of sharing them with those in need.
L: The people around us have many needs.
P: Please forgive us when we did not share with people in need—of our time, our talents, and our resources.
L: What do you lack?
P: There are things that we want, but what you have given us is excellent and good. Thank you for your providence.
Please forgive us our fear and greed. You are good.
[Moment for silent confession]
L: Dear People of God, rest assured that as you confess your sin that God is merciful and just to forgive you all your sin.
All: Help us all, dear Lord, to have big hearts that share what you give us so freely. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Offering Prayer:

We come before you, Lord Jehovah Jireh, to admit everything we have comes from you. We admit that none of it is meant for our pleasure only but is to be shared to bless others.
Please open our hearts and minds to share freely of what you give us,

and to be as free with them as you were in giving them to us.
We thank you and praise your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now, People of God, to help the world. We belong to the Lord.
We have been given much, and it is intended to bless the whole world.
Open your hearts this week; follow where God leads your heart.
May you find wonderful, great joy as you share your time, talents, and
resources—in Christ's name. Amen.

Sunday 22 – In Thanks: Stewardship

Theme:

We are called to be God's stewards of all things created.

Scripture:

Genesis 2:4b-15 / Isaiah 28:23-29 / Deuteronomy 10:12
Psalm 115
Colossians 4:2 / Acts 10:1-4
Matthew 6:1-24

Preaching Point:

Fear of the Lord causes us to protect all that God has made.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 21
Global Anabaptists, #5
Luther's Small Catechism, Part II-Creed, First Article – Of Creation

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

We Are God's People
For the Beauty of the Earth
This Is My Father's World
All Creatures of Our God and King
All Things Bright and Beautiful
B/G: For God So Loved the World
B/G: O Healing River
B/G: Working On A Building

Call to Worship:

L: We come to worship the God of Creation.
P: It is right to give God thanks and praise!
L: The Lord God in Jesus Christ created all things.
P: We come to worship Christ and pledge our nurture what he made.

Confession and Absolution:

L: O Lord our God, we have not always been faithful in protecting what you created.

P: We confess that we have squandered portions of our time and talent in trivial pursuits. We confess that we have not consciously nurtured your Creation—not giving it the care it deserves.

L: We ask for your forgiveness.

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, please know that as you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our unrighteousness. Know, too, that we are not free to live in sin, but are called to change our ways and work for the good of God's Kingdom.

All: We thank you for your mercy. Please help us to be faithful stewards of your Creation. In Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Offering Prayer:

O Lord our God, you have given us time, talents, and possessions. Please help us to be open-handed with your gifts for the benefit of others and your Creation. Help us to be faithful stewards. Amen.

Benediction:

As you go into God's Creation, know that you have been given a job to tend the earth for our Lord. Go joyfully; be faithful and seek God's help in all your tasks. May the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.

Sunday 23 – Justice with Peace

Themes:

God's will for believers is that they live in peace.
There is no peace if we are full of violence.
We must denunciate all forms of violence.

Scripture:

Amos 5:18-24 / Proverbs 14:30
Psalm 11
Galatians 5:22-26 / Romans 14:17, 15:13
Matthew 5:38-48 / John 14:23-31 / Luke 9:51-56

Preaching Points:

Attributes of God
Fruit of the Spirit
Generous hearts produce peace

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 22
Global Anabaptists, #5 & #7
What We Believe Together, p. 95-98
God's Story, Ch. 8
Claiming Faith, Session 9

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Let Justice Roll Down
May the Mind of Christ, My Savior
Cause Me to Come to Thy River, O Lord
Peace, Perfect Peace
O Happy Day
Wonderful Peace
B/G: On Heaven's Bright Shore
B/G: Just A Closer Walk
B/G: O Healing River

Call to Worship:

L: People of God, we are called to live in peace as we seek justice
for all peoples.

P: We come to worship you, Lord God Almighty.

Help us to desire your peace within us.

L: Come, find joy in the Lord who brings peace and hope for our lives.

P: We come.

Confession and Absolution:

L: Scripture tells us that prophets cry out for peace in times of trouble.
“‘Peace, peace,’ they say.”²⁹ Yet there is no peace without our willing
participation.

**P: Lord Jesus Christ, guide our thinking into the ways of peace
and help us to desire it more than having our own way.**

L: We have not worked faithfully toward peaceable ways in our lives.

**P: We confess that we are bent on pleasing ourselves more than
pleasing God.**

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, our Lord promised to lead us into the ways of peace,
but we must willingly follow.

All: Help us, Spirit of God, to desire and practice your ways of peace.

L: Our Lord is merciful and just to forgive us our sin as we humbly confess.
May we faithfully walk forward in peace.

All: Amen.

Offering Prayer:

O Lord our God, the prophet Micah told us, “He has shown you, O mortal,

²⁹ Jeremiah 6:14.

what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”³⁰
Help us give you our just and merciful living as our best offering.
Accept now these offerings as our token of promise.
We praise and thank you for all you have given us, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord bless you as you endeavor to walk forward in peace.
May your walk be held blameless and full of the quiet doings of
peace, hope, and love.
May the Lord bless you and keep you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Sunday 24 – What We Await

Theme:

Judgment and glorious worship of God are yet to come.

Scripture:

Exodus 6:1-8 / Deuteronomy 10:12-22 / Ezra 3:1-6
Psalm 150
Revelations 14:6-13, 20:11-15
Matthew 25:31-46

Preaching Points:

We will be judged for what we have done.
God knows the motives of our hearts.
Worship God only.

Helpful Sources:

Confession of Faith (1995), Article 24
God’s Story, Ch. 9
Presbyterian Q/A, p. 95-97, 100-101

Suggested Hymns/Songs:

Holy, Holy, Holy
All Creatures of Our God and King
Come, Thou Almighty King
Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee
To God Be the Glory
We Gather Together to Sing the Lord’s Blessing
My Jesus, I Love Thee
There’s Something About That Name
Thou Art Worthy

³⁰ Micah 6:8.

We Will Glorify
B/G: I Am Going to a City
B/G: Heaven's Bright Shore
B/G: I Am A Pilgrim
B/G: I'll Not Be A Stranger
B/G: I'll Fly Away
B/G: Old Rugged Cross
B/G: When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder

Call to Worship:

L: Today we worship; tomorrow we meet in glory!

P: O Lord our God, we glorify your name above all things.

**You are the One that created all things. You are the One who will
Judge the world and make all things right.**

L: Come, Lord Jesus.

P: Today we worship; tomorrow we meet in glory!

Confession and Absolution:

L: One day all things will be made right. One day all peoples will be judged
for their actions—both good and evil. Come, people of God, let us confess
our sins and be made right in God's sight.

P: O Lord our God, we have sinned. We have not lived in love.

**We have forgotten to do the things you called us to do.
Please forgive us.**

[Moment for silent confession]

L: People of God, as we confess our sins the Lord our God is merciful and
just to forgive us our sin.

P: Praise the Lord!

L: Walk with integrity, making your faith and your life as one thing.

All: Help us, Lord Jesus, to walk with integrity. Amen.

Offering Prayer:

Dear Lord, you are the giver of all good things.

Help grow our thankfulness. Grow our hearts to willingly give to others
what they need—that we may all praise your name.

We offer these gifts in Jesus' name. Amen.

Benediction:

L: Today, we worship the Lord our God. Tomorrow we meet in glory
to praise God forevermore!

P: O Lord our God, we glorify your name above all things.

L: Lord Jesus, help us to please you all the days of our lives—
by the power of your name.

All: Come, Lord Jesus! Come in power.

Heal our hearts and lead us in faith. Amen.

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH INTERVIEW SURVEYS

Survey #1

God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

S-1 – Based on what you experienced and heard in worship these last three weeks, would you say that Christ is equal with God the Father, or is he a slightly lesser being?

S-2 – Who created the world? Was it God the Father, Christ, or the Holy Spirit, or was it all of them?

S-3 – Some people say that Christ was a great Prophet but that we should not consider him to be God. Would you agree with that or would you say that Christ is God?

S-4 – If Christ gave us each the Holy Spirit, does that mean the Holy Spirit is less important than Christ and God the Father?

S-5 – If God is in control of all things, does that mean God causes evil to occur?

S-6 – Based on what you experienced and heard in worship these last three weeks, was anything surprising about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Survey #2

Scripture

S-1 – Based on what you experienced and heard in worship this week, is all scripture inspired by God?

S-2 – Can fictional stories, like parables, tell a major truth? (If the Prodigal Son parable never actually happened, can it tell us a truth about God?)

S-3 – What does it mean to look through the lens of Jesus Christ to understand scripture?

S-4 – If we read the same piece of scripture in January of two different years, is it possible that we will learn two different lessons from our reading?

S-5 – Is all scripture helpful for understanding God?

Survey #3

Peace With Justice

S-1 – What is the best way to live in peace with other people?

S-2 – To live in peace, we are encouraged to dwell in the fruit of the Spirit. Can you name two or more fruit of the Spirit?

S-3 – Violence and war are longstanding parts of human history. Should we not bless national efforts to protect our way of life?

S-4 – Can we strive for peace without having to work for human justice as well?

S-5 – Does violence sometimes make for peace?

APPENDIX C: CONSULTATION COMMENTS

by Bryan C. Auday, PhD

Consultation for: James Åkerson

ASSIGNMENT COMPLETED

Thanks for taking the time to clarify your thesis project so that I can offer some suggestions. Keep in mind that the observations I have made below do not need to be acted upon; you and your project advisor have the final word. Here are some thoughts that I would like to share with you as I read through your project proposal. They are not in any particular order.

- I like the direction that you have proposed for your project. From my perspective, you have outlined a methodology that will assess possible impacts of the portion of the lectionary that you wish to study. Essentially, you are proposing a one-group, pre-test, posttest design that gathers data using a questionnaire. This is a solid research strategy to follow. Having said that, I don't often do this, but I would like you to consider some modifications.
 - o Given what you stated about the education level and other demographic characteristics of your congregants (e.g., writing ability), I believe you should give some thought to changing the design strategy to a one-group, after-only study that uses semi-structured interviews as the primary means for gathering feedback. My rationale for this suggestion is based on the following:
 - I anticipate that gathering feedback from questionnaires on two separate occasions with the congregants that you describe will be very challenging. Although collecting the “before” data makes for a stronger study, it is not necessary or required. By collecting data only at the back end (“after”), this takes some pressure off of you and your congregants to contribute data to the study.
 - In addition, I suggest that you jettison the questionnaires and instead conduct semi-structured interviews on those who have participated in reading (studying?) the lectionaries. The interviews will solve the problem of requiring written responses from participants who might not be very competent at written communication, but can speak.
 - Also, you will not have to put a lot of pressure on your entire congregation to get them to participate. This avoids you needing to resort to practices that might give the appearance of coercion.
 - I believe the narrative that you acquire from the semi-structured interviews will ultimately produce better data than a brief questionnaire.
 - Keep in mind that my comments are just for you to consider. I'm not adamant that you need to change your proposal.

- Keep in mind that when you fill out the IRB proposal for the D.Min. office to conduct your data collection that you will need to gain permission from each participant using an informed consent document that you will need to prepare.
- Your project addresses a very meaningful topic—good work.
- I have notified the D.Min. office to let them know you have completed this required assignment.

Note: If you are in need of any additional consulting regarding questionnaire development, constructing a semi-structured interview, assembling a focus group, research methods, computing or interpreting statistics, graphing data, etc., feel free to contact me in the future. The additional consultation would be on a private pay basis (\$65.00/ hour). I can be reached at: bryan.auday@gordon.edu

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- Åkerson, James, and Wayne Millington, eds. *Rapid Response to Insect, Disease & Abiotic Impacts*. Philadelphia: National Park Service, 2010.

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